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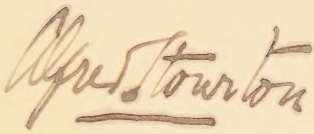

THE

DOCTOR'S WIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A Popular Preacher	1
II.	"And now I live, and now my Life is done!"	30
III.	Trying to be good	52
IV.	The first Whisper of the Storm .	69
V.	The Beginning of a great Change .	81
VI.	Fifty Pounds	108
VII.	"I'll not believe but Desdemona's honest"	135
VIII.	Keeping a Promise	160
IX.	Retrospective	189
X.	"'Twere best at once to sink to Peace"	205
XI.	Between two Worlds. . . .	220
XII.	"If any calm, a calm Despair" . .	283

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THE DOCTOR'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A POPULAR PREACHER.

WHAT could Isabel Gilbert do? The fabric of all her dreams was shivered like a cobweb in a sudden wind, and floated away from her for ever. Every body had misunderstood her. Even *he*, who should have been a demigod in power of penetration as in every other attribute,—even he had wronged and outraged her, and never again could she look trustfully upward to the dark beauty of his face; never again could her hand rest, oh, so lightly, for one brief instant on his arm; never again could she tell him in childish confidence all the vague yearnings, the innocently-sentimental aspirations, of her childish soul.

Never any more. The bright ideal of her life had melted away from her like a spectral cloud of silvery spray hovering above an Alpine waterfall, and had left behind only a cynical man of the world, who boldly asked her to run away from her husband, and was angry with her because she refused to comply with his cruel demand.

Not for one moment did the Doctor's Wife contemplate the possibility of taking the step which Roland Lansdell had proposed to her. Far off—as far away from her as some dim half-forgotten picture of fairyland—there floated a vision of what her life might have been with him, if she had been Clotilde, or the glittering Duchess, or Lady Gwendoline, or some one or other utterly different from herself. But the possibility of deliberately leaving her husband to follow the footsteps of this other man, was as far beyond her power of comprehension as the possibility that she might steal a handful of arsenic out of one of the earthenware jars in the surgery, and mix it with the sugar that sweetened George Gilbert's matutinal coffee.

She wandered away from Thurston's Crag, not

following the meadow pathway that would have taken her homeward: but going any where, half-unconscious, wholly indifferent where she went; and thinking, with unutterable sadness, of her broken dreams.

She had been so childish, so entirely childish, and had given herself up so completely to that one dear day-dream. I think her childhood floated away from her for ever in company with that broken dream; and that the gray dawn of her womanhood broke upon her, cold and chill, as she walked slowly away from the spot where Roland Lansdell lay face downwards on the grass, weeping over the ruin of *his* dream. It seemed as if in that hour she crossed Mr. Longfellow's typical rivulet and passed on to the bleak and sterile country beyond. Well may the maiden linger ere she steps across that narrow boundary; for the land upon this hither side is very bare and desolate as compared with the fertile gardens and pleasant meads she abandons for ever. The sweet age of enchantment is over; the fairy companions of girlhood, who were loveliest even when most they deluded,

spread their bright wings and flutter away; and the grave genius of common-sense—a dismal-looking person, who dresses in gray woollen stuff, warranted not to shrink under the ordeal of the wash-tub, and steadfastly abjures crinoline—stretches out her hand, and offers, with a friendly but uncompromising abruptness, to be the woman's future guide and monitress.

Isabel Gilbert was a woman all at once; ten years older by that bleak afternoon's most bitter discovery. Since there was no one in the world who understood her, since even *he* so utterly failed to comprehend her, it must be that her dreams were foolish and impossible of comprehension to any one but herself. But those foolish dreams had for ever vanished. She could never think of Roland Lansdell again as she had thought of him. All her fancies about him had been so many fond and foolish delusions. He was not the true and faithful knight who could sit for ever at the entrance of his hermitage gazing fondly at the distant convent-casement, which might or might not belong to his lost love's chamber. No; he was

quite another sort of person. He was the fierce dissolute cavalier, with a cross-handled sword a yard and a half long, and pointed shoes with long cruel spurs and steel chain-work jingling and clanking as he strode across his castle-hall. He was the false and wicked lover who would have scaled the wall of Hildegonde's calm retreat some fatal night, and would have carried the shrieking nun away, to go mad and throw herself into the Rhine on the earliest opportunity. He was a heartless Faust, ready to take counsel of Mephistopheles and betray poor trusting Gretchen. He was Robert the Devil, about whose accursed footsteps a whole graveyard of accusing spirits might arise at any moment. He was Steerforth, handsome, heartless, irresistible Steerforth, with no pity for simple Em'ly or noble Pegotty's broken heart.

It may be that Isabel did not admire Mr. Lansdell less when she thought of him thus; but there was an awful shuddering horror mingled with her admiration. She was totally unable to understand him as he really was — a benevolently-disposed

young man, desirous of doing as little mischief in the world as might be compatible with his being tolerably happy himself; and fully believing that no great or irreparable harm need result from his appropriation of another man's wife.

The tears rolled slowly down Mrs. Gilbert's pale cheeks as she walked along the Midlandshire lanes that afternoon. She did not weep violently, or abandon herself to any wild passion of grief. As yet she was quite powerless to realise the blankness of her future life, now that her dream was broken for ever. Her grief was not so bitter as it had been on the day of Roland's sudden departure from Mordred. He had loved her—she knew that now; and the supreme triumph of that thought supported her in the midst of her sorrow. He had loved her. His love was not the sort of thing she had so often read of, and so fondly believed in; it was only the destroying passion of the false knight, the cruel fancy of the wicked squire in top-boots, whom she had frequently seen —per favour of a newspaper-order — from the back-boxes of the Surrey Theatre. But he *did*

love her! He loved her so well as to cast himself on the ground and weep because she had rejected him; and the wicked squire in top-boots had never gone so far as that, generally contenting himself with more practical evidences of his vexation, such as the levying of an execution on the goods and chattels of the heroine's father, or the waylaying and carrying off of the heroine herself by hired ruffians. How oddly it happens that the worthy farmer in the chintz-waistcoat is *always* in arrear with his rent, and always stands in the relation of tenant to the dissolute squire!

Would Mr. Lansdell do any thing of that kind? Isabel gave a little shiver as she glanced at the lonely landscape, and thought how a brace of hireling scoundrels might spring suddenly across the hedge, and bear her off to a convenient postchaise. Were there any postchaises in the world now, Isabel wondered. A strange confusion of thoughts filled her mind. She could not become *quite* a woman all in a moment; the crossing of the mystic brook is not so rapid an operation as that. Some remnants of the old delusions hung

about her, and merely took a new form. Only the hand of wisdom could pluck the bandage from her eyes, and enable her to see things as they really were.

She sat down on the lower step of a stile to rest herself by and by, and smoothed back her hair, which had been blown about her face by the March wind, and retied the strings of her bonnet, before she went out on the high-road, that lay on the other side of the stile. When she did emerge upon the road, she found herself ever so far from home, and close to the model village where Mr. Raymond had given his simple entertainment of tea and pound-cake, and in which George Gilbert had stood by her side pleading to her with such profound humility. Poor George! The quiet aspect of the village-green, the tiny cottages, trim and bright in the fading March sunshine; the low wooden gate opening into the churchyard,—all these, so strange and yet so familiar, brought back the memory of a time that seemed unspeakably far away now. She remembered the faint thrill of pleasure which had stirred her breast when the

young surgeon asked her to be his wife. She did not for a moment think of what might have happened to her had she refused to hear his prayer. She could not imagine herself free, and Roland Lansdell her honourable suitor. She had thought of him as a remotely-grand and star-like creature to be worshipped for ever by kneeling devotees offering perpetual incense, and entirely happy in the radiance of his countenance. She thought of him now as a dark and destroying angel, in whose presence there was woe and ruin. She could not regard him without exaggeration ; her imagination was a kind of magnifying glass, through which she had always seen him,—a dimly-gorgeous figure, vaguely grand and wonderful, in the misty atmosphere of her girlish fancies.

It was Passion-week,—for Easter fell very late in March this year,—and the model village being a worthy model in the matter of piety as well as in all other virtues, there was a great deal of church-going among the simple inhabitants. The bells were ringing for evening-service now, as Mrs. Gilbert lingered in the road between the vil-

lage and the churchyard; and little groups of twos and threes, and solitary old women in black bonnets, passed her by, as she loitered quite at a loss whither to go, or what to do. They looked at her with solemn curiosity expressed in their faces. She was a stranger there, though Graybridge was only a few miles away; she was a stranger, and that alone, in any place so circumscribed as the model village, was enough to excite curiosity; and it may be that, over and above this, there was something in the look of her pale face and heavy eyelids, and a certain absent expression in her downcast eyes, calculated to arouse suspicion. Even in the midst of her trouble she could see that people looked at her suspiciously; and all in a moment there flashed back upon her mind the cruel things that Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey had said to her. Yes; all at once she remembered those bitter sentences. She had made herself a subject for slanderous tongues, and the story of her wicked love for Roland Lansdell was on every lip. If *he*, who should have known her—if he before whom she

had bared all the secrets of her sentimental soul—if even he thought so badly of her as to believe that she could abandon her husband and become the thing that Mr. Dombey believed his wife to be when he struck his daughter on the stairs—the sort of creature whom grave Judge Brandon met one night under a lamp-post in a London street—how could she wonder that other people slandered and despised her? Very suddenly had the gates of Paradise closed upon her: very swiftly had she been dropped down from the fairy regions of her fancy to this cold, hard, cruel workaday world; and being always prone to exaggeration, she fancied it even colder, harder, and more cruel than it was. She fancied the people pointing at her in the little street at Graybridge; the stern rector preaching at her in his Sunday sermon. She pictured to herself every thing that is most bitterly demonstrative in the way of scorn and contumely. The days were past in which solemn elders of Graybridge could send her out to wander here and there with bare bleeding feet and a waxen taper in her hand. There was no scarlet letter

with which these people could brand her as the guilty creature they believed her to be; but short of this, what could they *not* do to her? She imagined it all: her husband would come to know what was thought of her, and to think of her as others thought, and she would be turned out of doors. The day had been when she thought it must be rather a nice thing to be turned out of doors, to wander Florence-Dombey-like through the streets of a great city; but Miss Dombey had Captain Cuttle's cosy little home for her haven of shelter, and the belief in "drownded Wal'r's" excellence to support her in the hour of trial. Poor Isabel had no friend on earth, except indeed that weak querulous stepmother far away in cheap untaxed Jersey, and already all but devoured out of house and home by boys. Isabel had no friend: for was not *he* in whom she had trusted her cruel enemy now, inasmuch as he had done her the deepest wrong of all by his inability to understand her? Who would believe in her or help her, if all Graybridge was against her? She fancied the door of that square house in the dusty lane shut

upon her for ever, and only a blank and harsh-judging universe before her.

The groups of quiet people—almost all of them were women, and very few of them were young—melted slowly into the shadowy church-porch, like the dusky unsubstantial figures in a dioramic picture. The bells were still ringing in the chill twilight; but the churchyard was very lonely now; and the big solemn yew-trees looked weird and ghost-like against the darkening gray sky. Only one long low line of pale yellow light remained of the day that was gone! the day in which Isabel had said farewell to Roland Lansdell! It was a real farewell; no lovers' quarrel, wherefrom should spring that renewal of love so dismally associated with the Eton Latin-Grammar. It was an eternal parting; for had he not told her to go away from him—to leave him for ever? Not being the wicked thing for which he had mistaken her, she was nothing in the world for him. He did not require perpetual worship; he did not want her to retire to a convent, in order that he might enjoy himself for the rest of his existence by looking up

at her window; he did not want her to sit beside a brasier of charcoal with her hand linked in his—and die. He was not like that delightful Henry von Kleist, who took his Henriette to a pleasant inn about a mile from Potsdam, supped gaily with her, and then shot her and himself beside a lake in the neighbourhood. Mr. Lansdell wanted nothing that was poetical or romantic, and had not even mentioned suicide in the course of his passionate talk.

She went into the churchyard, and walked towards the little bridge upon which she had stood with George Gilbert by her side. The Wayverne flowed silently under the solid moss-grown arch; the wind had gone down by this time, and there was only now and then a faint shiver of the long dark rushes, as if the footsteps of the invisible dead, wandering in the twilight, had stirred them. She stood on the bridge, looking down at the quiet water. The opportunity had come now, if she really wanted to drown herself. Happily for weak mankind, self-destruction is a matter in which opportunity and inclination very seldom go together.

The Doctor's Wife was very miserable; but she did not feel quite prepared to take that decisive plunge which might have put an end to her earthly troubles. Would they hear the splash yonder in the church, if she dropped quietly in among the rushes from the sloping bank under the shadow of the bridge? Would they hear the water surging round her as she sank, and wonder what the sound meant, and then go on with their prayers, indifferent to the drowning creature, and absorbed by their devotions? She wondered what these people were like, who kept their houses so tidily, and went to church twice a day in Passion-week, and never fell in love with Roland Lansdell. Long ago, in her childhood, when she went to see a play, she had wondered about the people she met in the street; the people who were not going to the theatre. Were they very unhappy? did they know that she had a free admission to the upper-boxes of the Adelphi, and envy her? How would *they* spend the evening,—they who were not going to weep with Mr. Benjamin Webster, or Miss Sarah Woolgar? Now she wondered about people who

were not miserable like herself—simple commonplace people, who had no yearnings after a life of poetry and splendour. She thought of them as a racer, who had just run second for the Derby, might think of a quiet pack-horse plodding along a dusty road and not wanting to win any race whatsoever.

"Even if they knew him, they wouldn't care about him," she thought. They did know him, perhaps,—saw him ride by their open windows, on a summer's afternoon, gorgeous on a two-hundred-guinea hack, and did not feel the world to be a blank desert when he was gone.

Did she wish to be like these people? No! Amid all her sorrow she could acknowledge, in the words of the poet, that it was better to have loved and lost him, than never to have loved him at all. Had she not lived her life, and was she not entitled to be a heroine for ever and ever by reason of her love and despair?

For a long time she loitered on the bridge, thinking of all these things, and thinking very little of how she was to go back to Graybridge, where

her absence must have created some alarm by this time. She had often kept the surgeon waiting for his dinner before to-day; but she had never been absent when he ate it. There was a station at the model village; but there was no rail to Graybridge; there was only a lumbering old omnibus, that conveyed railway-passengers thither. Isabel left the churchyard, and went to the little inn before which George had introduced her to his gardener and factotum. A woman standing at the door of this hostelry gave her all needful information about the omnibus, which did not leave the station till half-past eight o'clock; until that time she must remain where she was. So she went slowly back to the churchyard, and being tired of the cold and darkness without, crept softly into the church.

The church was very old and very irregular. There were only patches of yellow light here and there, about the pulpit and reading-desk, up in the organ-loft, and near the vestry-door. A woman came out of the dense obscurity as Isabel emerged from the porch, and hustled her into a pew; scandalised by her advent at so late a stage of the ser-

vice, and eager to put her away somewhere as speedily as possible. It was a very big pew, square and high, and screened by faded curtains, hanging from old-fashioned brass-rods. There were a great many hassocks, and a whole pile of prayer and hymn books in the darkest corner; and Isabel, sitting amongst these, felt as completely hidden as if she had been in a tomb. The prayers were just finished,—the familiar prayers, which had so often fallen like a drowsy cadence of meaningless words upon her unheeding ears, while her erring and foolish thoughts were busy with the master of Mordred Priory.

She heard the footsteps of the clergyman coming slowly along the matted aisle—the rustling of his gown as he drew it on his shoulders; she heard the door of the pulpit closed softly; and then a voice, a low earnest voice, that sounded tender and solemn in the stillness, recited the preliminary prayer. There are voices which make people cry, —voices which touch too acutely on some hidden spring within us, and open the flood-gates of our tears; and the voice of the curate of Hurstonleigh

was one of these. He was only a curate; but he was very popular in the model village, and the rumour of his popularity had already spread to neighbouring towns and villages. People deserted their parish-churches on a Sunday afternoon and came to hear Mr. Austin Colborne preach one of his awakening sermons. He was celebrated for awakening sermons. The stolid country-people wept aloud sometimes in the midst of one of his discourses. He was always in earnest; tenderly earnest, sorrowfully earnest, terribly earnest sometimes. His life, too, outside the church was in perfect harmony with the precepts he set forth under the shadow of the dark oaken sounding-board. There are some men who *can* believe, who can look forward to a prize so great and wonderful as to hold the pain and trouble of the race of very small account when weighed against the hope of victory. Austin Colborne was one of these men. The priestly robes he wore had not been loosely shuffled on by him because there was no other lot in life within his reach. He had assumed his sacred office with all the enthusiasm of a Loyola

or an Irving, and he knew no looking back. It was such a man as this whom people came to hear at the little church beside the wandering Wayverne. It was such a man as this whose deep-toned voice fell with a strange power upon Isabel Gilbert's ears to-night. Ah, now she could fancy Louise de la Vallière low on her knees in the black shadow of a gothic pillar, hearkening to the cry of the priest who called upon her to repent and be saved. For some little time she only heard the voice of the preacher—the actual words of his discourse fell blankly on her ear. At first it was only a beautiful voice, a grand and solemn voice, rising and sinking on its course like the distant murmur of mighty waves for ever surging towards the shore. Then, little by little, the murmurs took a palpable form, and Isabel Gilbert found that the preacher was telling a story. Ah, that story, that exquisite idyl, that solemn tragedy, that poem so perfect in its beauty, that a sentimental Frenchman has only to garnish it with a few flowery periods, and lo, all the world is set reading it on a sudden, fondly believing they have found some-

thing new. Mr. Austin Colborne was very fond of dwelling on the loveliness of that sublime history, and more frequently founded his discourse upon some divine incident in the records of the four Evangelists than on an obscure saying in St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians or the Hebrews. This is no place in which to dwell upon Mr. Austin Colborne, or the simple Christian creed it was his delight to illustrate. He was a Christian, according to the purest and simplest signification of the word. His sermons were within the comprehension of a rustic or a child, yet full and deep enough in meaning to satisfy the strictest of logicians, the sternest of critics. Heaven knows I write of him and of his teaching in all sincerity, and yet the subject seems to have so little harmony with the history of a foolish girl's errors and shortcomings, that I approach it with a kind of terror. I only know that Isabel Gilbert, weeping silently in the dark corner of the curtained pew, felt as she had never felt in all her Graybridge churchgoing; felt at once distressed and comforted. A new hero dawned upon her life; and, amid a very

flood of blinding light, she saw the image of One who was worthy of all worship; a God whom women, from the hour of His advent upon earth until this sceptical, critical to-day, have ever followed with a special love and reverence; a God who held it no shame to count Mary Magdalene among His worshippers; and who, for ever vested with an unmistakable divinity, was never more entirely divine than in His pitying tenderness for woman. Amidst all the arguments to be used against strong-minded claimants for the equality of the sexes, I wonder no one has ever urged the evidence of the Redeemer's treatment of those women whose names are eternally intermingled with His history.

Was it strange that, all at once, Isabel Gilbert should open her ears to the sublime story, which, in one shape or other, she had heard so often? Surely the history of all popular preachers goes far to demonstrate that Heaven gives a special power to some voices. When Whitefield preached the Gospel to the miners at Kingswood,—to rugged creatures who were little better than so many sa-

vages, but who, no doubt, in some shape or other, had heard that Gospel preached to them before,—the scalding tears ploughed white channels upon the black cheeks as the men listened. At last the voice of all others that had power to move them arose, and melted the stubborn ignorant hearts. Is it inspiration or animal-magnetism which gives this power to some special persons? or is it not rather the force of faith, out of which is engendered a will strong enough to take hold of the wills of other people, and bend them howsoever it pleases? When Danton, rugged and gigantic, thundered his hideous demands for new hecatombs of victims, there must have been something in the revolutionary monster strong enough to trample out the common humanity in those who heard him, and mould a mighty populace to his own will and purpose as easily as a giant might fashion a mass of clay. Surely Mirabeau was right. There can be nothing impossible to the man who believes in himself. The masses of this world, being altogether incapable of lasting belief in any thing, are always ready to be beaten into any shape by the

chosen individual who *believes*, and is thus of another nature—something so much stronger than all the rest as to seem either a god or a demon. Cromwell appears, and all at once a voice is found for the wrongs of a nation. See how the king and his counsellors go down like corn before the blast of the tempest, while the man with a dogged will, and a sublime confidence in his own powers, plants himself at the helm of a disordered state, and wins for himself the name of Tiger of the Seas. Given Mr. John Law, with ample confidence in his own commercial schemes, and all France is rabid with a sudden madness, beating and trampling one another to death in the Rue Quincampoix. Given a Luther, and all the old papistical abuses are swept away like so much chaff before the wind. Given a Wesley, the believer, the man who is able to preach forty thousand sermons and travel a hundred thousand miles, and, behold, a million disciples exist in this degenerate day to bear testimony to his power.

Mr. Austin Colborne's influence no doubt proceeded in some wise from the same source. He

believed in himself; for, looking down into the pure depths of his own soul, he saw no vague and shifting monsters, called reservations, doubts, cross-purposes, unstable desires, hurrying away to hide themselves, in darksome caves and crannies, from his scrutinising eye. He believed in his creed, because, study it as he might, he found no crack or flaw in it. The history, which to Roland Lansdell seemed only an exquisite legend, a sublime theme for Italian painters or dreamy-minded poets, was to Austin Colborne a grand indisputable fact, written upon the very face of the universe. He was thoroughly happy in his faith and in his life; and a benign influence seemed to radiate from him, in which hard ignorant men and women grew better and wiser.

Was it strange, then, that Isabel Gilbert, so dangerously susceptible of every influence, should feel this influence, as she had felt others? She had not been religiously brought up. In the Camberwell household Sunday had been a day on which people got up later than usual, and there were pies or puddings to be made. It had been

a day associated with savoury baked meats, and a beer-stained *Weekly Dispatch* newspaper borrowed from the nearest tavern. It had been a day on which Mr. Sleaford slept a good deal on the sofa, excused himself from the trouble of shaving, and very rarely put on his boots. Raffish-looking men had come down to Camberwell in the Sunday twilight, to sit late into the night smoking and drinking, and discoursing in a mysterious jargon known to the household as "business talk." Sometimes of a summer evening, Mrs. Sleaford, awakened to a sense of her religious duties, would suddenly run a raid amongst the junior branches of the family, and hustle off Isabel and one or two of the boys to evening-service at the big bare church by the canal. But the spasmodic attendance at divine service had very little effect upon Miss Sleaford, who used to sit staring at the holes in her gloves; or calculating how many yards of ribbon, at how much per yard, would be required for the trimming of any special bonnet to which her fancy leaned; or thinking how a decent-looking young man up in the gallery might be a stray nobleman,

with a cab and tiger waiting somewhere outside the church, who would perhaps fall in love with her before the sermon was finished. She had not been religiously brought up; and the church-going at Graybridge had been something of a bore to her: or at best a quiet lull in her life, which left her free to indulge the foolish vagaries of her vagabond fancy. But now, for the first time, she was touched and melted: the weak sentimental heart was caught at the rebound. She was ready to be any thing in the world except a commonplace matron, leading a dull purposeless life at Graybridge. She wanted to find some shrine, some divinity, who would accept her worship; some temple lifted high above the sordid workaday earth, in which she might kneel for ever and ever. If not Roland Lansdell, why then Christianity. She would have commenced her novitiate that night had she been in a Roman-Catholic land, where convent-doors were open to receive such as her. As it was, she could only sit quietly in the pew and listen. She would have liked to go to the vestry when the service came to an end, and

cast herself at the feet of the curate, and make a full confession of her sins; but she had not sufficient courage for that. The curate might misunderstand her, as Roland Lansdell had done. He might see in her only an ordinarily wicked woman, who wanted to run away from her husband. Vague yearnings towards Christian holiness filled her foolish breast; but as yet she knew not how to put them into any shape. When the congregation rose to leave the church, she lingered to the last, and then crept slowly away, resolved to come again to hear this wonderful preacher. She went to the little station whence the Graybridge omnibus was to start at half-past eight; and after waiting a quarter of an hour took her place in a corner of the vehicle. It was nearly ten when she rang the bell at her husband's gate, and Mrs. Jeffson came out with a grave face to admit her.

"Mr. George had his dinner and tea alone, ma'am," she said in tones of awful reproof, while Isabel stood before the little glass in the sitting-room taking off her bonnet; "and he's gone out

again to see some sick folks in the lanes on the other side of the church. He was right down uneasy about you."

"I've been to Hurstonleigh, to hear Mr. Colborne preach," Isabel answered, with a very feeble effort to appear quite at her ease. "I had heard so much about his preaching, and I wanted so to hear him."

It was true that she had heard Austin Colborne talked of amongst her church-going acquaintance at Graybridge; but it was quite untrue that she had ever felt the faintest desire to hear him preach. Had not her whole life been bounded by a magic circle, of which Roland Lansdell was the resplendent centre?

CHAPTER II.

"AND NOW I LIVE, AND NOW MY LIFE IS DONE!"

GEORGE GILBERT accepted his wife's explanation of her prolonged absence upon that March afternoon. She had carried her books to Thurston's Crag, and had sat there reading, while the time slipped by unawares, and it was too late to come back to dinner; and so she had bethought herself that there was evening-service at Hurstonleigh during Passion-week, and she might hear Mr. Colborne preach. George Gilbert received this explanation as he would have received any other statement from the lips in whose truth he believed. But Mrs. Jeffson treated her young mistress with a stately politeness that wounded Isabel to the quick. She endured it very meekly, however; for she felt that she had been wicked, and that all her sufferings were the fruit of her own sin. She

stayed at home for the rest of the week, except when she attended the Good-Friday's services at Graybridge church with her husband; and on Sunday afternoon she persuaded George to accompany her to Hurstonleigh. She was making her feeble effort to be good; and if the enthusiasm awakened in her breast by Mr. Colborne's preaching died out a little after she left the church, there was at the worst something left which made her a better woman than she had been before. But did she forget Roland Lansdell all this time? No; with bitter anguish and regret she thought of the man who had been as powerless to comprehend her as he was intellectually her superior.

"He knows so much, and yet did not know that I was not a wicked woman," she thought in simple wonder. She did not understand Roland's sceptical manner of looking at every thing, which could perceive no palpable distinction between wrong and right. She could not comprehend that this man had believed himself justified in what he had done.

But she thought of him incessantly. The

image of his pale reproachful face—so pale, so bitterly reproachful—never left her mental vision. The sound of his voice bidding her leave him was perpetually in her ears. He had loved her: yes; however deep his guilt, he had loved her, and had wept because of her. There were times when the memory of his tears, flashing back upon her suddenly, nearly swept away all her natural purity, her earnest desire to be good; there were times when she wanted to go to him and fall at his feet, crying out, "Oh, what am I, that my life should be counted against your sorrow? How can it matter what becomes of me, if you are happy?"

There were times when the thought of Roland Lansdell's sorrow overcame every other thought in Isabel Gilbert's mind. Until the day when he had thrown himself upon the ground in a sudden passion of grief, she had never realised the possibility of his being unhappy because of her. For him to love her in a patronising far-off kind of manner was very much. Was it not the condescension of a demigod, who smiles upon some earthly creature? Was it not a reversal of the

story of Diana and Endymion? It was not the goddess, but the god, who came down to earth. But that he should love her desperately and passionately, and be grief-stricken because he could not win her for his own,—this was a stupendous fact, almost beyond Isabel Gilbert's comprehension. Sometimes she thought he was only the wicked squire who pretends to be very much in earnest in the first act, and flings aside his victim with scorn and contumely in the second. Sometimes the whole truth burst upon her, sudden as a thunder-clap, and she felt that she had indeed done Roland Lansdell a great and cruel wrong.

And where was he all this time? The man who had judged Isabel Gilbert by a common standard, and had believed her quite ready to answer to his summons whenever he chose to call her to his side. Who shall tell the bitter sinful story of his grief and passion? Never once in all his anger against Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey, when she jilted him for the sake of young Lord Heatherland, had he felt so desperate a rage, so deep an

indignation, as that which now possessed him when he thought of Isabel Gilbert. Wounded in his pride, his vanity; shaken in the self-confidence peculiar to a man of the world; he could not all at once forgive this woman who had so entirely duped and deceived him. He was mad with mingled anger and disappointment when he thought of the story of the last twelvemonth. The bitterness of all his struggles with himself; his heroic resolutions—young and fresh in the early morning, old and gray and wasted before the brief day was done—came back to him: and he laughed aloud to think how useless all those perplexities and hesitations had been, when the obstacle, the real resistance, to his sinful yearnings was *here*—here, in the shape of a simple woman's will.

There may be some men who would not have thought the story finished with that farewell under Lord Thurston's oak; but Roland Lansdell was not one of those men. He had little force of mind or strength of purpose with which to fight against temptation: but he had, on the other hand, few

of the qualifications which make a tempter. So long as he had been uncertain of himself and the strength of his love for Isabel, he had indeed dissembled so far as to make a poor show of indifference. So long as he meant to go away from Midlandshire without "doing any harm," he had thought it a venial sin to affect some little friendship for the husband of the woman he loved. But from the moment in which all vacillation gave way before a settled purpose—from the hour of his return to Midlandshire—he had made no secret of his feelings or intentions. He had urged this girl to do a dishonourable act: but he had used no dishonourable means. No words can tell how bitterly he felt his disappointment. For the first time in his life this favourite of bountiful nature, this spoiled child of fortune, found there was something in the world he could not have, something that was denied to his desire. It was such a very little time since he had bewailed the extinction of all youthful hope and ardour in pretty cynical little verses, all sparkling with scraps of French and Latin, and Spanish and Italian, cunningly

woven into the native pattern of the rhyme. It was only a few months since he had amused himself by scribbling melodious lamentations upon the emptiness of life in general, and that "mortal coldness of the soul" to which a young man of seven-and-twenty, with a great deal of money and nothing particular to do, is especially subject. Ah, how pitilessly he had laughed at other men's tenderest sentiments! What cruel aphorisms from Scarron and Rochefoucauld, and Swift and Voltaire, and Wilkes and Mirabeau, he had quoted upon the subject of love and woman! How resolutely he had refused to believe in the endurance of passion! how coldly he had sneered at the holy power of affection! He had given himself cynical airs upon the strength of his cousin's falsehood: and had declared there was no truth in woman, because Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey had been true to the teaching of her life, and had tried to make the best market of her Saxon face and her long ringlets. And now he was utterly false to his own creed. He was in love, passionately, earnestly in love, with a foolish sentimental little woman,

whose best charm was — What? That was the question which he tried in vain to answer. He gnashed his teeth in an access of rage when he sought to discover why he loved this woman. Other women more beautiful, and how much more accomplished, had spread enchanted webs of delicious flattery and tenderness about him; and he had broken through the impalpable meshes, and had gone away unscathed from the flashing glances of bright eyes, unmoved by the smiles for which other men were ready to peril so much. Why was it that his heart yearned for this woman's presence? She was in no way his intellectual equal: she was not a companion for him, even at her best, when she murmured pretty little feminine truisms about Shelley and Byron. In all his loiterings by Lord Thurston's waterfall, he could recall no wise or witty saying that had ever fallen from those childish lips. And yet, and yet—she was something to him that no other woman had ever been, or, as he firmly believed, ever could become. Oh, for one upward glance of those dark eyes, so shyly tender, so pensively serene! Oh,

for the deep delight of standing by her side upon the border of a still Italian lake; for the pure happiness of opening all the wild realms of wisdom and poetry before those youthful feet! And then in after years, when she had risen little by little to the standard which the world would deem befitting his wife,—then, fate, or chance, the remote abstraction most men call Providence, having favoured the truest and purest love upon this earth,—then he might proclaim his ownership of the prize he had won for himself; then he might exhibit before shallow, sceptical mankind one bright and grand example of a perfect union.

Mr. Lansdell's thoughts wandered very much after this fashion as he wore out the long dreary days in his solitary home. He went no where; he received no one. He gave the servants standing orders to say that he was out, or engaged, to whomsoever came to Mordred. His portmanteaus were packed, and had been packed ever since the night of his last meeting with Isabel Gilbert. Every day he gave fresh orders respecting his departure. He would have the carriage at such an

hour, to catch a certain train: but when the hour came, the groom was sent back to the stables, and Mr. Lansdell lingered yet another day at Mordred Priory.

He could not go away. In vain, in vain he wrestled with himself: most bitterly did he despise and hate himself for his unmanly weakness; but he could not go away. She would repent: she would write to summon him to another meeting beneath the bare old oak. With an imagination as ardent as her own, he could picture that meeting; he could almost hear her voice as he fancied the things she would say. "My love, my love!" she would cry, clasping those slender hands about his arm; "I cannot live without you: I cannot, I cannot!"

All manner of vague fashionable fancies which he had taken up one by one, in common with the frivolous circles in which he had been a favourite, only to drop them with a sneer and a shrug of his shoulders when the whim was over; all manner of foolish spiritualist frivolities came back upon him now, and were frail straws to which his mind

clung with a something that was almost faith. Must there not be something more than common in the attraction that bound him to Isabel Gilbert? Was it odic force? was it animal-magnetism? was it to be explained by this, that, or the other new-fangled theory that had served to make conversation for a Parisian winter and a London spring? What was it? He could find a hundred answers to that question; but not one which satisfied him. He only knew that he was false to all the philosophy of his age, and that he was eating his heart out because of a country surgeon's half-educated wife.

The weeks went slowly by, and Mr. Lansdell's body-servant had what that individual was pleased to designate "a precious time of it." Never was gentleman's gentleman so tormented by the whims and vagaries of his master. One day "we" were off to Swisserland—Mr. Lansdell's valet always called it Swisserland—and we were to go as fast as the railway service could carry us, and not get a wink of sleep any wheres, except in railway-carriages, until we got to Paw or Bas-el—the valet

called it Bas-el. Another day we were going to St. Petersburg, with our friend Hawkwood, the Queen's messenger; and a pretty rate we were going at, knocking the very lives out of us. Sometimes we were for tearing across the Balkan range, on those blessed Turkish horses, that jolt a man's life half out of him; or we were going on a yachting-cruise in the Mediterranean; or fishing in the wildest regions of Norway. And all about a trumpery minx at Graybridge! Mr. Lansdell's body-servant would wind up, with unmitigated contempt: all about a young person who was not fit to hold a candle to Sarah Jane the housemaid, or Eliza in the laundry! Alas for Roland Lansdell, the servants who waited upon him knew quite as well as he knew himself the nature of the fever which had made him so restless! They knew that he was in love with a woman who could never be his wife; and they despised him for his folly, and discussed all the phases of his madness over their ponderous meat-suppers in the servants' hall.

The weeks went slowly by. To Roland the days were weary and the nights intolerable. He

went up to London several times, always leaving Mordred alone and at abnormal hours, and every time intending to remain away. But he could not: a sudden fever seized him as the distance grew wider between him and Midlandshire. She would repent of her stern determination: she would write to him, avowing that she could not live without him. Ah, how long he had expected that letter! She would grow suddenly unable to endure her life perhaps, and would be rash and desperate enough to go to Mordred in the hope of seeing him. This would happen while he was away: the chance of happiness would be offered to him, and he would not be there to seize it. She, his love, the sole joy and treasure of his life, would be there, trembling on his threshold, and he would not be near to welcome and receive her. The people at the Clarendon thought that Mr. Lansdell had gone mad, so sudden were his flights from their comfortable quarters.

And all this time he could hear nothing of the woman he loved. He could not talk to his servants, and he had closed his doors against all

visitors. What was she doing? Was she at Graybridge still? Was she leading the old quiet life, sitting in that shabby parlour, where he had sat by her side? He remembered the pattern of the Kidderminster carpet, the limp folds of the muslin-curtains, the faded crimson silk that decorated the front of the piano upon which she had sometimes played to him, oh, so indifferently. Day after day he haunted the bridge under Lord Thurston's oak; day after day he threw tribute of cigar-ends into the waterfall, while he waited in the faint hope that the Doctor's Wife might wander thither. Oh, how cruel she was; how cruel! If she had ever loved him, she too would have haunted that spot. She would have come to the place associated with his memory: she would have come, as he came, in the hope of another meeting.

Sometimes Mr. Lansdell ventured to ride along the little street at Graybridge and through the dusty lane in which the doctor's house stood. On horseback the master of Mordred Priory was almost on a level with the bedroom windows of George Gilbert's habitation, and could look down

into the little parlour where Isabel was wont to sit. Once and once only he saw her there, sitting before the table with some needlework in her hands, so deeply absorbed, as it seemed, in her commonplace labour that she did not see the cavalier who rode so slowly past her window. How should he know how often she had run eagerly to that very window —her face pale, her heart beating tempestuously —only to find that it was not *his* horse whose hoofs she had heard in the lane?

Perhaps the sight of George Gilbert's wife sitting at her needlework gave Roland Lansdell a sharper pang than he would have felt had he seen two mutes from Wareham keeping guard at the gate, and Mrs. Gilbert's coffin being carried out at the door. She was not dead, then: she could live and be happy, while he—! Well, he was not dead himself, certainly; but he was the very next thing to being dead; and he felt indignant at the sight of Isabel's apparent composure.

He walked to Lowlands in the course of a week or so after this, and strolled into the drawing-room with some undefined intention of flirting

desperately with his cousin Gwendoline; of making her an offer of marriage, perhaps. Why should he not marry? He could scarcely be more miserable than he was; and a marriage with Gwendoline would be some kind of revenge upon Isabel. He was inclined to do any thing desperate and foolish, if by so doing he could sting that cruel obdurate heart. Was this generous? Ah, no. But then, in spite of all that is said and sung in its honour, love is *not* such a very generous passion. Roland found his cousin alone, in the long low morning-room looking out into her flower-garden. She was making wax-flowers, and looked almost as tired of her employment as if she had been some poor little artizan toiling for scanty wages.

"I'm very glad you have interrupted me, Roland," she said, pushing away all the paraphernalia of her work; "they are very tiresome; and, after all, the roses are as stiff as camellias, and at the very best a vase of wax-flowers only reminds one of an hotel at a watering-place. They always have wax-flowers and Bohemian-glass candelabra

at sea-side hotels. And now tell me what you have been doing, Roland; and why you have never come to us. We are so terribly dull."

"And do you think my presence would enliven you?" demanded Mr. Lansdell, with a sardonic laugh. "No, Gwendoline; I have lived my life, and I am only a dreary bore, whom people tolerate in their drawing-rooms out of deference to the West-end tailor who gets me up. I am only so much old clothes, and I have to thank Mr. Poole for any position that I hold in the world. What is the use of me, Gwendoline? what am I good for? Do I ever say any thing new, or think any thing new, or do any thing for which any human creature has cause to say, Thank you? I have lived my life. Does this kind of thing usually grow old, I wonder?" he asked, striking himself lightly on the breast. "Does it wear well? Shall I live to write gossiping old letters and collect china? Will Christie and Manson sell my pictures when I am dead? and shall I win a posthumous reputation by reason of the prices given for my wines, especially Tokay?—all connoisseurs go in

f r Tokay. What is to become of me, Gwendoline? Will any woman have pity upon me and marry me, and transform me into a family-man, with a mania for short-horned cattle and subsoil-drainage? Is there any woman in all the world capable of caring a little for such a worn-out wretch as I?"

It almost depended upon Gwendoline Pomphrey whether this speech should constitute an offer of marriage. A pretty lackadaisical droop of the head; a softly-murmured, "Oh, Roland, I cannot bear to hear you talk like this; I cannot bear to think such qualities as yours can be so utterly wasted;" any sentimental, womanly little speech, however stereotyped: and the thing would have been done. But Lady Gwendoline was a great deal too proud to practise any of those feminine arts affected by manœuvering mothers. She might jilt a commoner for the chance of winning a marquis; but even that she would only do in a grand off-hand way befitting a daughter of the house of Ruysdale. She looked at her cousin now with something like contempt in the curve

of her thin upper-lip. She loved this man perhaps as well as the Doctor's Wife loved him, or it may be even with a deeper and more enduring love: but she was of his world, and could see his faults and shortcomings as plainly as he saw them himself.

"I am very sorry you have sunk so low as this, Roland," she said gravely. "I fancy it would be much better for you if you employed your life half as well as other men, your inferiors in talent, employ their lives. You were never meant to become a cynical dawdler in a country-house. If *I* were a man, a fortnight in the hunting-season would exhaust the pleasures of Midlandshire for me; I would be up and doing amongst my compeers."

She looked, not at Roland, but across the flower-beds in the garden as she spoke, with an eager yearning gaze in her blue eyes. Her beauty, a little sharp of outline for a woman, would have well become a young reformer, enthusiastic and untiring in a noble cause. There are these mistakes sometimes—these mesalliances of clay and

spirit. A bright ambitious young creature, with the soul of a Pitt, sits at home and works sham roses in Berlin wool; while her booby brother is thrust out into the world to fight the mighty battle.

The cousins sat together for some time, talking of all manner of things. It was a kind of relief to Roland to talk to some one—to some one who was not likely to lecture him, or to pry into the secrets of his heart. He did not know how very plainly those secrets were read by Gwendoline Pomphrey. He did not know that he had aroused a scornful kind of anger in that proud heart by his love for Isabel Gilbert.

"Have you seen any thing of your friends lately—that Graybridge surgeon and his wife, whom we met one day last summer at Mordred?" Lady Gwendoline asked by and by with supreme carelessness. She had no intention of letting Roland go away with his wound unprobed.

"No; I have seen very little of them," Mr. Lansdell answered. He was not startled by Lady Gwendoline's question: he was perpetually think-

ing of Isabel, and felt no surprise at any allusion made to her by other people. "I have not seen Mr. Gilbert since I returned to England."

"Indeed! I thought he had inspired you with an actual friendship for him; though I must confess, for my own part, I never met a more commonplace person. My maid, who is an intolerable gossip, tells me that Mrs. Gilbert has been suddenly seized with a religious mania, and attends all the services at Hurstonleigh. The Midlandshire people seem to have gone mad about that Mr. Colborne. I went to hear him last Sunday myself, and was very much pleased. I saw Mr. Gilbert's wife sitting in a pew near the pulpit, with her great unmeaning eyes fixed upon the curate's face all through the sermon. She is just the sort of person to fall in love with a popular preacher."

Mr. Lansdell's face flushed a vivid scarlet, and then grew pale. "With her great unmeaning eyes fixed upon the curate's face." Those wondrous eyes that had so often looked up at him, mutely eloquent, tenderly pensive. Oh, had he

been fooled by his own vanity? was this woman a sentimental coquette, ready to fall in love with any man who came across her path, learned in stereotyped schoolgirl phrases about platonic affection? Lady Gwendoline's shaft went straight home to his heart. He tried to talk about a few commonplace subjects with a miserable assumption of carelessness; and then, looking suddenly up at the clock on the chimney-piece, made a profuse apology for the length of his visit, and hurried away. It was four o'clock when he left the gates of Lowlands, and the next day was Sunday.

"I will see for myself," he muttered, as he walked along a narrow lane, slashing the low hedge-rows with his stick as he went; "I will see for myself to-morrow."

CHAPTER III.

TRYING TO BE GOOD.

The Sunday after Roland Lansdell's visit to his cousin was a warm May day, and the woodland lanes and meadows through which the master of Mordred Priory walked to Hurstonleigh were bright with wild-flowers. Nearly two months had gone by since he and the Doctor's Wife had parted on the dull March afternoon which made a crisis in Isabel's life. The warm breath of the early summer fanned the young man's face as he strolled through the long grass under the spreading branches of elm and beech. He had breakfasted early, and had set out immediately after that poor pretence of eating and drinking. He had set out from Mordred in feverish haste; and now that he had walked two or three miles, he looked wan and pale in the vivid light of the bright May morning.

To-day he looked as if his cynical talk about himself was not altogether such sentimental nonsense as genial, practical Mr. Raymond thought it. He looked tired, worn, mentally and physically, like a man who has indeed lived his life. Looking at him this morning, young, handsome, clever, and prosperous though he was, there were very few people who would have ventured to prophesy for him a bright and happy existence, a long and useful career. He had a wan, faded, unnatural look in the summer daylight, like a lamp that has been left burning all night. He had only spoken the truth that day in the garden at Mordred. The Lansdells had never been a long-lived race; and a look that lurked somewhere or other in the faces of all the portraits at the Priory might have been seen in the face of Roland Lansdell to-day. He was tired, very tired. He had lived too fast, and had run through his heritage of animal spirits and youthful enthusiasm like the veriest spendthrift who squanders a fortune in a few nights spent at a gaming-house. The nights are very brilliant while they last, riotous with a wild excitement

that can only be purchased at this monstrous cost. But, oh, the blank gray mornings, the freezing chill of that cheerless dawn, from which the spendthrift's eyes shrink appalled when the night is done!

Roland Lansdell was most miserably tired of himself, and all the world except Isabel Gilbert. Life, which is so short when measured by art, science, ambition, glory: life, which always closes too soon upon the statesman or the warrior, whether he dies in the prime of life like Peel, or flourishes a sturdy evergreen like Palmerston; whether he perishes like Wolfe on the heights of Quebec, or sinks to his rest like Wellington in his simple dwelling by the sea: life, so brief when estimated by a noble standard, is cruelly long when measured by the empty pleasures of an idle worldling with fifteen thousand a-year. Emile Augier has very pleasantly demonstrated that the world is much smaller for a rich man than it is for a poor one. My lord the millionaire rushes across wide tracks of varied landscape asleep in the padded corner of a first-class carriage, and

only stops for a week or so here and there in great cities, to be bored almost to death by cathedrals and valhallas, picture-galleries and ruined Roman baths, "done" in the stereotyped fashion. While the poorer traveller, jogging along out-of-the-way country roads, with his staff in his hand and his knapsack on his shoulder, drops upon a hundred pleasant nooks in this wide universe, and can spend a lifetime agreeably in seeing the same earth that the millionaire, always booked and registered all the way through, like his luggage, grows tired of in a couple of years. We have only to read Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and Dickens's *Uncommercial Traveller*, in order to find out how much there is in the world for the wanderer who has eyes to see. Read the story of Mr. Dickens's pedestrian rambles, and then read William Beckford's delicious discontented *blasé* letters, and see the difference between the great writer, for whom art is long and life is only too short, and the man of pleasure, who squandered all the wealth of his imagination upon the morbid phantasma of *Vathek*, and whose talent could find no higher exercise than the planning of objectionable towers.

The lesson which Mr. Lansdell was called upon to learn just now was a very difficult one. For the first time in his life he found that there was something in the world that he could not have; for the first time he discovered what it was to wish wildly, madly for one precious treasure out of all the universe; and to wish in vain.

This morning he was not such a purposeless wanderer as he usually was; he was going to Hurstonleigh church, in the hope of seeing Isabel Gilbert, and ascertaining for himself whether there was any foundation for Lady Gwendoline's insinuation. He wanted to ascertain this: but above all, he wanted to *see* her—only to see her; to look at the pale face and the dark eyes once more. Yes; though she were the basest and shallowest-hearted coquette in all creation.

Mr. Lansdell was doomed to be disappointed that morning, for the Doctor's Wife was not at Hurstonleigh church. Graybridge would have been scandalised if Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert had not attended morning-service in their own parish; so it was only in the afternoon or evening that Isabel was free to worship at the feet of the popular preacher.

The church was very full in the morning, and Roland sat in a pew near the door, waiting patiently until the service concluded. Isabel might be lurking somewhere in the rambling old edifice, though he had not been able to see her. He listened very attentively to the sermon, and bent his head approvingly once or twice during Mr. Colborne's discourse. He had heard so many bad sermons, delivered in divers languages, during his wandering existence, that he had no wish to depreciate a good one. When all was over, he stood at the door of his pew, watching the congregation file slowly and quietly out of the church, and looking for Isabel. But she was not there. When the church was quite empty, he breathed a long regretful sigh, and then followed the rest of the congregation.

"She will come in the afternoon, perhaps," he thought. "Oh, how I love her! what a weak pitiful wretch I must be to feel like this; to feel this sinking at my heart because she is not here; to consider all the universe so much emptiness because her face is missing!"

He went away into a secluded corner of the churchyard, a shadowy corner, where there was an angle in the old wall, below which the river crept in and out among the sedges. Here the salutations of the congregation loitering about the church-door seemed only a low distant hum; here Mr. Lansdell could sit at his ease upon the bank, staring absently at the blue Wayverne, and thinking of his troubles.

The distant murmur of voices, the sound of footsteps, and the rustling of women's light garments in the summer-breeze died away presently, and a death-like stillness fell upon the churchyard. All Hurstonleigh was at dinner, being a pious village that took its sabbath meal early, and dined chiefly on cold meats and crisp salads. The place was very still; and Roland Lansdell, lolling idly with his back against the moss-grown wall, had ample leisure for contemplation.

What did he think of during those two long hours in which he sat in the churchyard waiting for the afternoon service? What did he think of? His wasted life; the good things he might have

done upon this earth? No! His thoughts dwelt with a fatal persistency upon one theme. He thought of what his life might have been, if Isabel Gilbert had not baulked all his plans of happiness. He thought of how he might have been sitting, that very day, at that very hour, on one of the fairest islands in the Mediterranean, with the woman he loved by his side: if she had chosen, if she had only chosen that it should be so. And he had been so mistaken in her, so deluded by his own fatuity, as to believe that any obstacle on her part was utterly out of the question. He had believed that it was only for him to weigh the matter in the balance and decide the turning of the scale.

He sat by the water listening to the church-bells as they rang slowly out upon the tranquil atmosphere. It was one of those bright summer-days which come sometimes at the close of May, and the sky above Hurstonleigh church was cloudless. When the bells had been ringing for a long time, slow footsteps sounded on the gravel-walks upon the other side of the churchyard, with now

and then the creaking of a gate or the murmur of voices. The people were coming to church. Roland's heart throbbed heavily in his breast. Was *she* amongst them? Ah, surely he would have recognised her lightest footfall even at that distance. Should he go and stand by the gate, to make sure of seeing her as she came in? No, he could not make a show of himself before all those inquisitive country-people; he would wait till the service began, and then go into the church. That half-hour, during which the bells swung to and fro in the old steeple with a weary monotonous clang, seemed intolerably long to Roland Lansdell: but at last, at last, all was quiet, and the only bell to be heard in the summer stillness was the distant tinkle of a sheep-bell far away in the sunlit meadows. Mr. Lansdell got up as the clock struck three, and walked at a leisurely pace to the church.

Mr. Colborne was reading that solemn invitation to the wicked man to repent of his wickedness as the squire of Mordred went into the low porch. The penetrating voice reached the remotest corners

of the old building; and yet its tone was low and solemn as an exhortation by a dying man's bed. The church was not by any means so full as it had been in the morning; and there was none of that fluttering noise of bonnet-strings and pocket-handkerchiefs which is apt to disturb the quiet of a crowded edifice. The pew-opener—always on the look-out to hustle stray intruders into pews—pounced immediately upon Mr. Lansdell.

"I should like to sit up-stairs," he whispered, dropping a half-crown into her hand; "can you put me somewhere up-stairs?"

He had reflected that from the gallery he should be better able to see Isabel, if she was in the church. The woman curtsied and nodded, and then led the way up the broad wooden stairs: where would she not have put Mr. Lansdell for such a donation as that which he had bestowed upon her!

The gallery at Hurstonleigh church was a very special and aristocratic quarter. It consisted only of half-a-dozen roomy old pews at one end of the church, immediately opposite the altar, and com-

manding an excellent view of the pulpit. The chief families of the neighbourhood occupied these six big open pews; and the common herd in the aisles below contemplated these aristocratic persons admiringly in the pauses of the service. As the grand families in the outskirts of Hurstonleigh were not quite such unbating church-goers as the model villagers themselves, these gallery-pews were not generally filled of an afternoon; and it was into one of these that the grateful pew-opener ushered Mr. Lansdell.

She was there; yes, she was there. She was alone, in a pew near the pulpit, on her knees, with her hands clasped and her eyes looking upwards. The high old-fashioned pew shut her in from the congregation about her, but Mr. Lansdell could look down upon her from his post of observation in the gallery. Her face was pale and worn, and her eyes looked larger and brighter than when he had last seen her. Was she in a consumption? Ah, no; it was only the eager yearning soul which was always consuming itself; it was no physical illness, but the sharp pain of a

purely mental struggle that had left those traces on her face. Her lover watched her amidst the kneeling congregation; and a kind of holy exaltation in her face reminded him of pictures of saints and angels that he had seen abroad. Was it real, that exalted expression of the pale still face? was it real, or had she begun a new flirtation, a little platonic sentimentalism in favour of the popular preacher?

"The fellow has something in him, and is not by any means bad-looking," thought Mr. Lansdell; "I wonder whether she is laying traps for him with her great yellow-black eyes?" And then in the next moment he thought how, if that look in her pale face were real, and she was really striving to be good,—how then? Had he any right to come into that holy place? for the place was holy, if only by virtue of the simple prayers so simply spoken by happy and pious creatures who were able to believe. Had he any right to come there and trouble this girl in the midst of her struggle to forget him?

"I think she loved me," he mused; "surely

I could not be mistaken in that; surely I have known too many coquettes in my life to be duped by one at the last! Yes, I believe she loved me."

The earlier prayers and the psalms were over by this time; and Mrs. Gilbert was seated in her pew facing the gallery, but with the pulpit and reading-desk between. Mr. Colborne began to read the first lesson; and there was a solemn hush in the church. Roland was seized with a sudden desire that Isabel should see him. He wanted to see the recognition of him in her face. Might he not learn the depth of her love, the strength of her regret, by that one look of recognition? A green serge curtain hung before him. He pushed the folds aside; and the brazen rings made a little clanging noise as they slipped along the rod. The sound was loud enough to startle the woman whom Mr. Lansdell was watching so intently. She looked up and recognised him. He saw a white change flit across her face; he saw her light muslin garments fluttered by a faint shiver; and then in the next moment she was looking demurely downwards at the book on her

lap, something as she had looked on that morning when he first met her under Lord Thurston's oak.

All through the service Roland Lansdell sat watching her. He made no pretence of joining in the devotions of the congregation; but he disturbed no one. He only sat, grim and sombre-looking, staring down at that one pale face in the pew near the pulpit. A thousand warring thoughts and passionate emotions waged in his breast. He loved her so much that he could not be chivalrous; he could not even be just or reasonable. It is all very well for cold impassable King Arthur to address the fallen Queen with all the pitiful tenderness, the dignified grandeur of the finest gentleman in Christendom. Has he not the supreme consciousness of his own rectitude; the knowledge that all heaven and earth are with him, to support him in his hour of trial? It is easy for the good man to be magnanimous; but not so easy for the sinner. Launcelot, sinful, passionate, unhappy Launcelot, can find no such noble phrases. Only rugged lamentations and vain upbraidings arise from the heart of the man who knows he is in the wrong. All through the service Roland Lansdell

sat watching the face of the woman he loved. If Austin Colborne could have known how strangely his earnest, pleading words fell upon the ears of two of his listeners that afternoon! Isabel Gilbert sat very quietly under all the angry fire of that dark gaze. Only now and then were her eyelids lifted; only now and then did her eyes steal one brief imploring glance at the face in the gallery. In all the church she could see nothing but that face. It absorbed and blotted out all else; and shone down upon her, grand and dazzling, as of old.

She was trying to be good. For the last two months she had been earnestly trying to be good. There was nothing else for her in the world but goodness, seeing that *he* was lost to her—seeing that a romantic Beatrice-Portinari kind of existence was an impossibility. If she had been a dweller in a Catholic country, she would have gone into a convent; as it was, she could only come to Hurstonleigh to hear Mr. Colborne, whose enthusiasm answered to the vague aspirations of her own ignorant heart. She was trying to be good. She and worthy plain-spoken Mrs. Jeffson were on the best possible terms now, for the Doc-

tor's Wife had taken to staying at home a great deal, and had requested honest Tilly to instruct her in the art of darning worsted socks.

Would the sight of the wicked squire's dark reproachful face undo all the work of these two months? Surely not. To meet him once more—to hear his voice—to feel the strong grasp of his hand—ah, what deep joy! But what good could come of such a meeting? She could never confide in him again. It would be only new pain—wasted anguish. Besides, was there not some glory, some delight, in trying to be good? She felt herself a Louise de la Vallière standing behind a grating in the convent-parlour, while a kingly Louis pleaded and stormed on the other side of the iron bars.

Some such thoughts as these sustained her all through that afternoon service. The sermon was over; the blessing had been spoken; the congregation began to disperse slowly and quietly. Would *he* go now? Would he linger to meet her and speak to her? would he go away at once? He did linger, looking at her with an appealing expression in his haggard face. He stood up, as if waiting until she should leave her pew, in order

to leave his at the same moment. But she never stirred. Ah, if Louise de la Vallière suffered as much as that! What wonder that she became renowned for ever in sentimental story!

Little by little the congregation melted out of the aisle. The charity-boys from the neighbourhood of the organ-loft came clumping down the stairs. Still Mr. Lansdell stood waiting and watching the Doctor's Wife in the pew below. Still Isabel Gilbert kept her place, rigid and inflexible, until the church was quite empty.

Then Mr. Lansdell looked at her—only one look—but with a world of passion concentrated in its dark fury. He looked at her, slowly folding his arms, and drawing himself to his fullest height. He shrugged his shoulders, with one brief contemptuous movement, as if he flung some burden off him by the gesture, and then turned and left the pew. Mrs. Gilbert heard his firm tread upon the stairs, and she rose from her seat in time to see him pass out of the porch. It is very nice to have a place in romantic story: but there are some bitter pangs to be endured in the life of a Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST WHISPER OF THE STORM.

THERE was no omnibus to take Mrs. Gilbert back to Graybridge after the service at Hurstonleigh; but there had been some Graybridge people at church, and she found them lingering in the churchyard talking to some of the model villagers, enthusiastic in their praises of Mr. Colborne's eloquence.

Amongst these Graybridge people was Miss Sophronia Burdock, the maltster's daughter, very radiant in a bright-pink bonnet, so vivid as almost to extinguish her freckles, and escorted by young Mr. Pawlkatt, the surgeon's son, and his sister, a sharp-nosed, high-cheek-boned damsel, who looked polite daggers at the Doctor's Wife. Was not Mr. George Gilbert a rising man in Graybridge? and was it likely that the family of his rival should have any indulgence for the shortcomings of his pale-faced wife?

But Miss Sophronia was in the humour to heap coals of fire on the head of the nursery-governess whom George Gilbert had chosen to marry. Sophronia was engaged, with her father's full consent, to the younger Pawlkatt, who was to insure his life for the full amount of the fair damsel's dower, which was to be rigidly tied up for her separate use and maintenance, &c., and who looked of so sickly and feeble a constitution that the maltster may have reasonably regarded the matrimonial arrangement as a very fair speculation. Sophronia was engaged, and displayed the little airs and graces that Graybridge considered appropriate to the position of an engaged young lady. "The only way to make love *now*," said Mr. Nash to Goldsmith, "is to take no manner of notice of the lady." And Graybridge regarded the art of polite courtship very much in this fashion, considering that a well-bred damsel could not possibly be too contemptuously frigid in her treatment of the man whom she had chosen from all other men to be her partner for life. Acting on this principle, Miss Burdock, although intensely affectionate in her manner to Julia Pawlkatt, and warmly gushing in

her greeting of the Doctor's Wife, regarded her future husband with a stony glare, only disturbed by a scornful smile when the unfortunate young man ventured to make any remark. To reduce a lover to a state of coma, and exhibit him in that state to admiring beholders for an entire evening, was reckoned high art in Graybridge.

Every body in the little Midlandshire town knew that Miss Burdock and Mr. Pawlkatt were engaged; and people considered that Augustus Pawlkatt had done a very nice thing for himself by becoming affianced to a young lady who was to have four thousand pounds tightly tied up for her separate use and maintenance.

The consciousness of being engaged and having a fortune combined to render Sophronia especially amiable to every body but the comatose "future." Was Isabel alone, and going to walk back? "Oh, then, in that case you *must* go with us!" cried Miss Burdock, with a view to the exhibition of the unfortunate Augustus in peripatetic coma.

What could Mrs. Gilbert say, except that she would be delighted to go home with them? She was thinking of *him;* she was looking to see his

head towering above the crowd. Of course it would tower above that crowd, or any crowd; but he was like the famous Spanish fleet in the *Critic*, inasmuch as she could not see him because he was not to be seen. She went with Miss Burdock and her companions out of the churchyard, towards the meadow-path that led across country towards Graybridge. They walked in a straggling, uncomfortable manner, for Sophronia resolutely refused all offers of her future husband's arm; and he was fain to content himself with the cold comfort of her parasol, and a church-service of ruby-velvet with a great many ribbons between the pages.

The conversation during that sabbath afternoon walk was not very remarkable for liveliness or wisdom. Isabel only spoke when she was spoken to, and even then like a bewildered creature newly awakened from a dream. Miss Julia Pawlkatt, who was an intellectual young person, and prided herself upon not being frivolous, discoursed upon the botanical names and attributes of the hedge-blossoms beside the path, and made a few remarks on the science of medicine as adapted to female

study, which would have served for the groundwork of a letter in a Sunday paper.

Miss Burdock, who eschewed intellectual acquirements, and affected to be a gushing thing of the Dora Spenlow stamp, entreated her future sister-in-law not to be "dreadful," and asked Isabel's opinion upon several "dears" of bonnets exhibited that afternoon in Hurstonleigh church; and the comatose future, who so rarely spoke that it seemed hard he should always commit himself when he did speak, ventured a few remarks, which were received with black and frowning looks by the idol of his heart.

"I say, Sophronia, weren't you surprised to see Mr. Lansdell in the gallery?" the young man remarked, interrupting his betrothed in a discussion of a bunch of artificial may on the top of a white-tulle bonnet so sweet and innocent-looking. "You know, dear, he isn't much of a church-goer, and people *do* say that he's an atheist; yet there he was as large as life this afternoon, and I thought him looking very ill. I've heard my father say that all those Lansdells are consumptive."

Miss Burdock made frowning and forbidding

motions at the unhappy youth with her pale-buff eyebrows, as if he had mentioned an improper French novel, or started some other immoral subject. Poor Isabel's colour went and came. Consumptive! Ah, what more likely, what more proper, if it came to that? These sort of people were intended to die early. Fancy the Giaour pottering about in his eightieth year, and boasting that he could read small-print without spectacles! Imagine the Corsair on the parish; or Byron, or Keats, or Shelley grown old, and dim, and gray! Ah, how much better to be erratic and hapless Shelley, drowned in an Italian lake, than worthy respectable Samuel Rogers, living to demand, in feeble bewilderment, "And who are you, ma'am?" of an amiable and distinguished visitor! Of course Roland Lansdell would die of consumption; he would fade little by little, like that delightful Lionel in *Rosalind and Helen.*

Isabel improved the occasion by asking Mr. Augustus Pawlkatt, if many people died of consumption. She wanted to know what her own chances were. She wanted so much to die, now that she was good. The unhappy Augustus was

quite relieved by this sudden opening for a professional discourse, and he and his sister became scientific, and neglected Sophronia, while they gave Isabel a good deal of useful information respecting tubercular disease, phthisis, &c. &c.; whereon Miss Burdock, taking offence, lapsed into a state of sullen gloom highly approved by Graybridge as peculiarly befitting an engaged young lady who wished to sustain the dignity of her position.

At last they came out of a great corn-field into the very lane in which George Gilbert's house was situated; and Isabel's friends left her at the gate. She had done something to redeem her character in Graybridge by her frequent attendance at Hurstonleigh church, which was as patent to the gossips as ever her visits to Lord Thurston's oak had been. She had been cured of running after Mr. Lansdell, people said. No doubt George Gilbert had discovered her goings-on, and had found a means of clipping her wings. It was not likely that Graybridge would credit her with any such virtue as repentance, or a wish to be a better

woman than she had been. Graybridge regarded her as an artful and presuming creature, whose shameful goings-on had been stopped by marital authority.

She went into the parlour, and found the tea-things laid on the little table, and Mr. Gilbert lying on the sofa, which was too short for him by a couple of feet, and was eked-out by a chair, on which his clumsy boots rested. Isabel had never seen him give way to any such self-indulgence before; but as she bent over him, gently enough, if not tenderly, he told her that his head ached and he was tired, very tired; he had been in the lanes all the afternoon,—the people about there were very bad,—and he had been at work in the surgery since coming in. He put his hand in Isabel's, and pressed hers affectionately. A very little attention from his pretty young wife gratified him and made him happy.

"Why, George," cried Mrs. Gilbert, "your hand is as hot as a burning coal!"

Yes, he was very warm, he told her; the weather was hot and oppressive; at least, he had

found it so that afternoon. Perhaps he had been hurrying too much, walking too fast; he had upset himself somehow or other.

"If you'll pour out the tea, Izzie, I'll take a cup, and then go to bed," he said; "I'm regularly knocked up."

He took not one cup only, but four cups of tea, pouring the mild beverage down his throat at a draught; and then he went up to the room overhead, walking heavily, as if he were very tired.

"I'm sure you're ill, George," Isabel said, as he left the parlour; "do take something—some of that horrid medicine you give me sometimes."

"No, my dear; there's nothing the matter with me. What should there be amiss with me, who never had a day's illness in my life? I must have an assistant, Izzie; my work's too hard—that's what is the matter."

Mrs. Gilbert sat in the dusk for a little while after her husband had left her, thinking of that last look which Roland Lansdell had given her in the church.

Heaven knows how long she might have sat

thinking of him, if Mrs. Jeffson had not come in with those two miserable mould-candles, which were wont to make feeble patches of yellow haze, not light, in the doctor's parlour. After the candles had been brought, Isabel took a book from the top of the little chiffonier by the fire-place. It was a religious book. Was she not trying to be good now, and was not goodness incompatible with the perusal of Shelley's poetry on a Sunday? It was a very dry religious book, being in fact a volume of Tillotson's sermons, with more hard logic, and firstly, secondly, and thirdly, than ordinary human nature could support. Isabel sat with the volume open before her, staring hopelessly at the pale old-fashioned type, and going back a little way every now and then when she caught her thoughts far away from the Reverend Tillotson. She sat thus till after the clock had struck ten. She was all alone in the lower part of the house at that hour, for the Jeffsons had gone clumping upstairs to bed at half-past eight. She sat alone, a poor childish, untaught, unguided creature, staring at Tillotson, and thinking of Roland Lansdell; yet trying to

be good all the time in her own feeble way. She sat thus, until she was startled by a cautious single knock at the door. She started from her seat at the sound; but she went boldly enough, with the candle in her hand, to answer the summons.

There was nothing uncommon in a late knocking at the doctor's door,—some one from the lanes wanted medicine, no doubt; the people in the lanes were always wanting medicine. Mrs. Gilbert opened the door, and looked out into the darkness. A man was standing there, a well-clad rather handsome-looking man, with broad shoulders, bold black eyes, and a black beard that covered all the lower part of his face. He did not wait to be invited to enter, but walked across the threshold like a man who had a right to come into that house, and almost pushed Isabel on one side as he did so. At first she only stared at him with a blank look of wonder, but all at once her face grew as white as the plaster on the wall behind her.

"You!" she gasped, in a whisper; "you here!"

"Yes, me! You needn't stare as if you saw a ghost. There's nothing so very queer about me, is there? You're a nice young lady, I don't think, to stand there shivering and staring. Where's your husband?"

"Up-stairs. Oh, why, why did you come here?" cried the Doctor's Wife, piteously, clasping her hands like a creature in some extremity of fear and trouble: "how could you be so cruel as to come here; how could you be so cruel as to come?"

"How could I be so—fiddlesticks!" muttered the stranger with supreme contempt. "I came here because I had nowhere else to go, my lassie. You needn't whimper: for I shan't trouble you very long—this is not exactly the sort of place I should care to hang-out in: if you can give me a bed in this house for to-night, well and good; if not, you can give me a sovereign, and I'll find one elsewhere. While I *am* here, remember my name's Captain Morgan, and I'm in the merchant service,—just home from the Mauritius."

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF A GREAT CHANGE.

GEORGE GILBERT was something more than "knocked up." There had been a great deal of typhoid fever amongst the poorer inhabitants of Graybridge and the neighbouring villages lately —a bad infectious fever, which hung over the narrow lanes and little clusters of cottages like a black cloud; and the parish surgeon, working early and late, subject to sudden chills when his work was hottest, exposed to every variety of temperature at all times, fasting for long hours, and altogether setting at naught those very first principles of health, wherein it was his duty to instruct other people, had paid the common penalty to which all of his profession are, more or less, subject. Ah, how much we think of the soldier, who rides out amidst the blasts of trum-

pets and clashing of swords, and all the intoxicating magic of war; and how small an account we set upon the quiet courage of the village doctor, who meets death face to face every day, and never shirks the dangerous encounter! George Gilbert had caught a touch of the fever. Mr. Pawlkatt senior called early on Monday morning,—summoned by poor terrified Isabel, who was a stranger to sickness, and was frightened at the first appearance of the malady,—and spoke of his rival's illness very lightly, as a "touch of the fever."

"I always said it was infectious," he remarked; "but your husband would have it that it wasn't. It was all the effect of dirty habits and low living, he said, and not any special and periodical influence in the air. Well, poor fellow, he knows now who is right. You must keep him very quiet. Give him a little toast-and-water, and the lime-draughts I shall send you;" and Mr. Pawlkatt went on to give all necessary directions about the invalid.

Unhappily for the patient, it was not the

easiest matter in the world to keep him quiet. There was not much in George Gilbert, according to any poetic or sentimental standard: but there was a great deal in him, when you came to measure him by the far nobler standard of duty. He was essentially "thorough:" and in his own quiet way he was very fond of his profession. He was attached to those rough Midlandshire peasants, whom it had been his duty to attend from his earliest manhood until now. Never before had he known what it was to have a day's illness: and he could not lie tranquilly watching Isabel sitting at work near the window, with the sunlight creeping in at the edges of the dark curtain that had been hastily nailed up to shut out the glaring day:—he could not lie quietly there, while there were mothers of sick children, and wives of sick husbands, waiting for hope and comfort from his lips. True, Mr. Pawlkatt had promised to attend to George's patients: but then, unhappily, George did not believe in Mr. Pawlkatt,—the two surgeons' views were in every way opposed; and the idea of Mr. Pawl-

katt attending the sick people in the lanes, and seizing with delight on the opportunity of reversing his rival's treatment, was almost harder to bear than the thought of the same sufferers being altogether unattended. And, beyond this, Mr. Gilbert, so clever while other people were concerned, was not the best possible judge of his own case; and he would not consent to believe that he had the fever.

"I daresay Pawlkatt likes to see me laid by the heels here, Izzie," he said to his wife, "while he goes interfering with my patients, and bringing his old-fashioned theories to bear. He'll shut up the poor wretched little windows of all those cottages in the lanes, I daresay; and make the rooms even more stifling than they have been made by the builder. He'll frighten the poor women into shutting out every breath of fresh air, and then take every atom of strength away from those poor wasted creatures by his drastic treatment. Dr. Robert James Graves said he only wanted three words for his epitaph, and those words were, 'He fed Fevers.' Pawlkatt will

be for starving these poor feeble creatures in the lanes. It's no use talking, my dear; I'm a little knocked up; but I've no more fever about me than you have, and I shall go out this evening. I shall go round and see those people. There's a woman in the lane behind the church, a widow, with three children lying ill; and she seems to believe in me, poor creature, as if I was Providence itself. I can't forget the look she gave me yesterday, when she stood on the threshold of her wretched hovel, asking me to save her children, as if she thought it rested with me to save them. I can't forget her look, Izzie. It haunted me all last night, when I lay tossing about; for I was too tired to sleep, somehow or other. And when I think of Pawlkatt pouring his drugs down those children's throats, I—I tell you it's no use, my dear; I'll take a cup of tea, and then get up and dress."

It was in vain that Isabel pleaded; in vain that she brought to her aid Mrs. Jeffson, the vigorous and outspoken, who declared that it would be nothing short of self-murder if Mr.

Gilbert insisted on going out that evening; equally in vain the threat of summoning Mr. Pawlkatt. George was resolute: these quiet people always are resolute, not to say obstinate. It is your animated, impetuous, impulsive creatures who can be turned by a breath from the pursuit or purpose they have most vehemently sworn to accomplish. Mr. Gilbert put aside all arguments in the quietest possible manner. He was a medical man, and he was surely the best judge of his own health. He was wanted yonder among his patients, and he must go. Isabel and Mrs. Jeffson retired in melancholy resignation to prepare the tea, which was to fortify the surgeon for his evening's work. George came down stairs half an hour afterwards, looking, not ill, or even weak; but at once flushed and haggard.

"There's nothing whatever the matter with me, my dear Izzie," he said, as his wife followed him to the door; "I'm only done up by very hard work. I feel tired and cramped in my limbs, as if I'd caught cold somehow or other.

I was out all day in the wet last week, you know; but there's nothing in that. I shall just look in at those people at Briargate, and come back by the lanes; and then an hour or so in the surgery will finish my work, and I shall be able to get a good night's rest. I must have an assistant, my dear. The agricultural population gets very thick about Graybridge; and unless some one takes pity on the poor people, and brings about some improvement in the places they live in, we may look for plenty of fever."

He went out at the little gate, and Isabel watched him going along the lane. He walked a little slower than usual, and that was all. She watched him with a quiet affection on her face. There was no possible phase of circumstance by which she could ever have been brought to love him: but she knew that he was good, she knew that there was something praiseworthy in what he was doing to-night,—this resolute visiting of wretched sick people. It was not the knightly sort of goodness she had adored in the heroes of her choice: but it was good: and she admired

her husband a little, in a calm unenthusiastic manner,—as she might have admired a very estimable grandfather, had she happened to possess such a relative. She was trying to be good, remember; and all the sentimental tenderness of her nature had been aroused by George's illness. He was a much more agreeable person lying faint and languid in a shaded room, and requiring his head constantly bathed with vinegar-and-water, than when in the full vigour of health and clumsiness.

Mr. Pawlkatt came in for his second visit half an hour after George had left the house. He was very angry when he was told what had happened, and inveighed solemnly upon his patient's imprudence.

"I sent my son round amongst your husband's patients," he said; "and I must say, I am a little hurt by the want of confidence in me which Mr. Gilbert's conduct exhibits."

Isabel was too much occupied by all manner of contending thoughts to be able to do much towards the soothing of Mr. Pawlkatt's indig-

nation. That gentleman went away with his heart full of bitterness against the younger practitioner.

"If your husband's well enough to go about amongst his patients, he can't want *me*, Mrs. Gilbert," he said, as Isabel opened the gate for him; "but if you find him much worse, as you are very likely to do after his most imprudent conduct, you know where to send for me. I shall not come again till I'm sent for. Good-night."

Isabel sighed as she shut the gate upon the offended surgeon. The world seemed to her quite full of trouble just now. Roland Lansdell was angry with her. Ah! what bitter anger and contempt had been exhibited in his face in the church yesterday! George was ill, and bent on making himself worse, as it seemed; a Person—the person whom of all others the Doctor's Wife most feared—had dropped as it were from the clouds into Midlandshire; and here, added to all this trouble, was Mr. Pawlkatt indignant and offended. She did not go in-doors at once; the house seemed gloomy and hot in the summer dusk. She lingered by the gate, looking over the top

of the rails at the dusty lane,—the monotonous uninteresting lane, of whose changeless aspect she was so very tired. She was sorry for her husband now that he was ill. It was her nature to love and pity every weak thing in creation. The same kind of tenderness that she had felt long ago for a sick kitten, or a wounded bird, or a forlorn street-wanderer of the canine species looking pleadingly at her with great hungry eyes, filled her heart now, as she thought of George Gilbert. Out of the blank emptiness into which he had melted long ago at Roland Lansdell's advent, he emerged now, distinct and palpable, as a creature who wanted pity and affection.

"Is he very ill?" she wondered. "He says himself that he is not; and he is much cleverer than Mr. Pawlkatt."

She looked out into the lane, watching for her husband's coming. Two or three people went slowly by at considerable intervals; and at last, when it was growing quite dark, the figure of a boy, a slouching country-built lad, loomed out of the obscurity.

"Be this Muster Gilbert's the doctor's?" he asked of Isabel.

"Yes; do you want him?"

"I doan't want him; but I've got a letter for his wife, from a man that's staying up at our place. Be you she?"

"Yes; give me the letter," answered Isabel, putting her hand over the gate.

She took the missive from the hand of the boy, who resigned it in a slow unwilling manner, and then slouched away. Mrs. Gilbert put the letter in her pocket, and went into the house. The candles had just been taken into the parlour. The Doctor's Wife seated herself at the little table, and took the letter from her pocket and tore it open. It was a very brief and unceremonious kind of epistle, containing only these words:

"I've found comfortable quarters, for the nonce, in a little crib called the Leicester Arms, down in Nessborough Hollow, to the left of the Briargate Road. I suppose you know the place; and I shall expect to see you in the course of

to-morrow. Don't forget the sinews of war; and be sure you ask for Captain Morgan.

"Yours truly."

There was no signature. The letter was written in a big dashing hand, which had sprawled recklessly over a sheet of old-fashioned letter-paper; it seemed a riotous improvident kind of writing, that gloried in the wasted space and squandered ink.

"How cruel of him to come here!" muttered Isabel, as she tore the letter into a little heap of fragments; "how cruel of him to come! As if I had not suffered enough already; as if the misery and disgrace had not been bitter enough and hard enough to bear."

She rested her elbows on the table, and sat quite still for some time with her face hidden in her hands. Her thoughts were very painful; but, for once in a way, they were not entirely devoted to Roland Lansdell; and yet the master of Mordred Priory did figure in that long reverie. George came in by and by, and found her sitting in the attitude into which she had fallen after

destroying the letter. She had been very anxious about her husband some time ago; but for the last half-hour her thoughts had been entirely removed from him; and she looked up at him confusedly, almost startled by his coming, as if he had been the last person in the world whom she expected to see. Mr. Gilbert did not notice that look of confusion, but dropped heavily into the nearest chair, like a man who feels himself powerless to go one step farther.

"I'm very ill, Izzie," he said; "it's no use mincing the matter; I *am* ill. I suppose Pawlkatt is right after all, and I've got a touch of the fever."

"Shall I send for him?" asked Isabel, starting up; "he said I was to send for him if you were worse."

"Not on any account. I know what to do as well as he does. If I should happen to get delirious by and by, you can send for him, because I daresay you'd be frightened, poor girl, and would feel more comfortable with a doctor pottering about me. And now listen to me, my dear, while I give you a few directions; for my head feels

like a ton-weight, and I don't think I shall be able to sit upright much longer."

The doctor proceeded to give his wife all necessary instructions for the prevention of infection. She was to have a separate room prepared for herself immediately; and she was to fumigate the room in which he was to lie, in such and such a manner. As for any attendance upon himself, that would be Mrs. Jeffson's task.

"I don't believe the fever is infectious," Mr. Gilbert said; "I've caught it from the same causes that give it to the poor people: hard work, exposure to bad weather, and the foul air of the places I have to visit. Still we can't be too careful. You'd better keep away from my room as much as possible, Izzie; and let Mrs. Jeffson look after me. She's a strong-minded sort of a woman, who wouldn't be likely to catch a fever, because she'd be the last in the world to trouble her head about the risk of catching it."

But Isabel declared that she herself would wait upon her sick husband. Was she not trying to be good; and did not all Mr. Colborne's sermons

inculcate self-sacrifice and compassion, tenderness and pity? The popular curate of Hurstonleigh was perhaps the kind of teacher that some people would have designated a sentimentalist; but his tender, loving exhortations had a fascination which could surely never belong to the terrible threats and awful warnings of a sterner preacher. In spite of Austin Colborne's deep faith in an infinitely grand and beautiful region beyond this lower earth, he did not look upon the world as a howling wilderness, in which Providence intended people to be miserable. He might certainly behold in it a place of probation, a kind of preparatory school, in which very small virtues were expected of ignorant and helpless scholars, wandering dimly towards a starry future: but he did not consider it a universal Dotheboys Hall, presided over by a Providence after the model of Mr. Squeers. He looked into the simple narratives of four historians who flourished some eighteen centuries ago; and in those solemn pages he saw no possible justification for the gloomy view of life entertained by many of his clerical com-

peers. He found in those sacred histories a story that opened like an idyl; he found bright glimpses of a life in which there were marriage festivals and pleasant gatherings, social feasts and happy Sabbath wanderings through rustic paths betwixt the standing corn; he found pure earthly friendship counted no sin against the claims of Heaven, and passionate parental love not reproved as an unholy idolatry of the creature, but hallowed for ever by two separate miracles, that stand eternal records of a love so entirely divine as to be omnipotent, so tenderly human as to change the sternest laws of the universe in pity for weak human sorrow.

Mr. Pawlkatt was summoned to his rival's bedside early on the following morning. George's case was quite out of his own hands by this time; for he had grown much worse in the night, and was fain to submit to whatever people pleased to do to him. He was very ill. Isabel sat in the half-darkened room, sometimes reading, sometimes working in the dim light that crept through the curtain, sometimes sitting very quietly wrapt in

thought—painful and perplexing thought. Mr. Gilbert was wakeful all through the day, as he had been all through the night, tossing uneasily from side to side, and now and then uttering half-suppressed groans that wrung his wife's heart. She was very foolish—she had been very wicked—but there was a deep fount of tenderness in that sentimental and essentially feminine breast; and I doubt if George Gilbert was not more lovingly watched by his weak erring young wife than ever he could have been by a strong-minded helpmate, who would have frozen any lurking sentiment in Mr. Lansdell's breast by one glance from her pitiless eyes. The Doctor's Wife felt a remorseful compassion for the man who, after his own matter-of-fact fashion, had been very good to her.

"He has never, never been cross to me, as my stepmother used to be," she thought; "he married me without even knowing who I was, and never asked any cruel questions; and even now, if he knew, I think he would have pity upon me and forgive me."

She sat looking at her husband with an earnest

yearning expression in her eyes. It seemed as if she wanted to say something to him, but lacked the courage to approach the subject. He was very ill; it was no time to make any unpleasant communication to him. He had been delirious in the night, and had fancied that Mr. Pawlkatt was present, at an hour when that gentleman was snoring comfortably in his own bed. Isabel had been specially enjoined to keep her husband as quiet as it was possible for an active industrious man, newly stricken down by some unlooked-for malady, to be kept. No; whatever she might have to say to him must be left unspoken for the present. Whatever help he might, under ordinary circumstances, have given her, he was utterly powerless to give her now.

The day in that sick chamber seemed terribly long. Not because Isabel felt any selfish weariness of her task; she was only too anxious to be of use to the man she had so deeply wronged; she was only too eager to do something,—something that Mr. Colborne himself might approve,—as an atonement for her sin. But she was

quite unused to sickness; and, being of a hyper-sensitive nature, suffered keenly at the sight of any suffering whatever. If the invalid was restless, she fancied directly that he was worse—much worse—in imminent danger perhaps: if he rambled a little in his talk betwixt sleeping and waking, she sat with his burning hands clasped in hers, trembling from head to foot: if he fell into a profound slumber, she was seized with a sudden terror, fancying him unnaturally quiet, and was fain to disturb him, in her fear lest he should be sinking into some ominous lethargy.

The Doctor's Wife was not one of those excellent nurses who can settle themselves with cheerful briskness in a sick-room, and improve the occasion by the darning of a whole basketful of invalided stockings, reserved for some such opportunity. She was not a nurse who could accept the duties of her position in a businesslike way, and polish off each separate task as coolly as a clerk in a banking-house transacts the work assigned to him. Yet she was very quiet withal,—soft of foot, gentle-handed, tender; and George was pleased

to see her sitting in the shadowy room, when he lifted his heavy eyelids a little now and then; he was pleased in a dim kind of way to take his medicine from her hand,—the slender little white hand with tapering fingers,—the hand he had admired as it lay lightly on the moss-grown brickwork of the bridge in Hurstonleigh churchyard on the afternoon when he asked her to be his wife.

Mrs. Gilbert sat all day in her husband's room; but about five in the afternoon George fell into a deep slumber, in which Mr. Pawlkatt found him at a little after six o'clock. Nothing could be better than that tranquil sleep, the surgeon said; and when he was gone, Mrs. Jeffson, who had been sitting in the room for some time, anxious to be of use to her master, suggested that Isabel should go down stairs and out into the garden to get a breath of fresh air.

"You must be a'most stifled, I should think, sitting all day in this room," Tilly said compassionately. Mrs. Gilbert's face crimsoned all over, as she answered in a timid hesitating way:

"Yes; I should like to go down stairs a little,

if you think that George is sure to sleep soundly for a long time; and I know you'll take good care of him. I want to go out somewhere—not very far; but I must go to-night."

The Doctor's Wife sat with her back to the light; and Mrs. Jeffson did not see that sudden tide of crimson that rushed into her face, and faded, as she said this; but George Gilbert's housekeeper gave a sniff of disapproval notwithstanding.

"I should have thought if you was the greatest gadderabout that ever was, you'd have stayed quietly at home while your husband was lying ill, Mrs. Gilbert," she said, sharply; "but of course you know your own business best."

"I'm not going far: only—only a little way on the Briargate Road," Isabel answered, piteously; and then her head sank back against the wall behind her, and she sighed a plaintive, almost heart-broken sigh. Her life was very hard just now,—hard and difficult,—begirt with terror and peril, as she thought.

She put on her bonnet and shawl—the darkest

and shabbiest she possessed. Mrs. Jeffson watched her, as she stood before the old-fashioned looking-glass, and perceived that she did not even take the trouble to brush the rumpled hair which she pushed under her dingy bonnet. "She can't be going to meet *him* in that plight, anyhow," thought honest Matilda, considerably pacified by the contemplation of her mistress's toilette. She lifted the curtain and looked out of the window as the garden-gate closed on Isabel, and she saw the Doctor's Wife hurrying away with her veil pulled over her face. There was some kind of mystery about this evening walk: something that filled the Yorkshire woman's mind with vague disquietude.

The "touch of the fever," alluded to so lightly by Mr. Pawlkatt, turned out to be a great deal more serious in its nature than either he or George Gilbert had anticipated. The week came to an end, and the parish surgeon was still a prisoner in the room in which his father and mother had died. It seemed quite a long time now since he had been active and vigorous, going about his

work all day, mixing medicines in the surgery, and coming into the parlour at stated times to eat hearty meals of commonplace substantial food. Now that he was so weak, and that it was a matter for rejoicing when he took a couple of spoonfuls of beef-tea, Isabel's conscience smote her cruelly as she remembered how she had despised him because of his healthy appetite; with what bitter scorn she had regarded him when he ate ponderous slices of underdone meat, and mopped up the last drop of the goriest-looking gravy with great pieces of bread. He had been ill for only a week, and yet already it seemed quite a normal state of things for him to be lying in that darkened chamber, helpless and uneasy, all through the long summer day. The state of the doctor's health was common talk in Graybridge; as common a subject for idle people's converse as the heat of the weather, or the progress of the green corn in the fields beyond the little town. All manner of discreditable-looking parish patients came every day to the surgery-door to inquire after the surgeon's health; and went away downcast

and lamenting, when they were told that he grew daily worse. Mrs. Gilbert, going down to answer these people's questions, discovered for the first time how much he was beloved; he who had not one of the attributes of a hero. She wondered sometimes whether it might not be better to wear thick boots, and go about doing good, than to be a used-up aristocratic wanderer, with white hands, and, oh, such delightful varnished boots wrinkled over an arched instep. She was trying to be good herself now—pleased and fascinated by Mr. Colborne's teaching as by some newly-discovered romance—she wanted to be good, and scarcely knew how to set about the task; and, behold, here was the man whom she had so completely ignored and despised, infinitely above her in the region she had entered. But was her romantic attachment to Roland Lansdell laid down at the new altar she had found for herself? Ah, no; she tried very hard to do her duty; but the old sentimental worship still held its place in her heart. She was like some classic pagan newly converted to Christianity, and yet entertaining a lurking

love and reverence for the old heathen deities, too grand and beautiful to be cast off all at once.

The first week came to an end, and still Mr. Pawlkatt came twice a day to visit his patient; and still he gave very much the same directions to the untiring nurses who waited on George Gilbert. He was to be kept very quiet; he was to continue the medicine; all the old stereotyped rules were to be observed.

Throughout her husband's illness, Isabel had taken very little rest; though Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson would gladly have kept watch alternately with her in the sick-room, and were a little wounded when banished therefrom. But Mrs. Gilbert wanted to be good; the harder the task was, the more gladly did she undertake it. Very often, quite alone in that quiet room, she sat watching through the stillest hours of the night.

During all those solemn watches did any bad thoughts enter her mind? did she ever think that she might be free to marry Roland Lansdell if the surgeon's illness should terminate fatally? Never—never once did such a dark

and foul fancy enter the regions of her imagination. Do not believe that because she had been a foolish woman she must necessarily be a vicious woman. Again and again, on her knees by her husband's bed, she supplicated that his life might be spared. She had never encountered death, and her imagination shrank appalled from the thought of that awful presence. A whole after life of happiness could not have atoned to her for the one pang of seeing a dreadful change come upon the familiar face. Sometimes, in spite of herself, though she put away the thought from her with shuddering horror, the idea that George Gilbert might not recover *would* come into her mind. He might not recover: the horror which so many others had passed through might overtake her. Oh, the hideous tramp of the undertaker's men upon the stairs; the knocking, unlike all other knocking; the dreadful aspect of the shrouded house! She thought of all the deaths in her favourite books: of Paul Dombey, fading slowly, day by day, with the golden water rippling on the wall; of David Copperfield, sitting weeping in the

dusk; and Agnes, with her holy face and quiet uplifted hand. If—if any such sorrow came upon her, Mrs. Gilbert thought that she would join some community of holy women, and go about doing good until she died. Was it so very strange, this sudden conversion? Surely not! In these enthusiastic natures sentiment may take any unexpected form. It is a question whether a Madame de Chantal shall write hazy devotional letters to a St. Francis de Sales, or peril her soul for the sake of an earthly lover.

CHAPTER VI.

FIFTY POUNDS.

After that scene in the church at Hurstonleigh, Roland Lansdell went back to Mordred; to think, with even greater bitterness, of the woman he loved. That silent encounter—the sight of the pale face, profoundly melancholy, almost statuesque in its air of half-despairing resignation—had exercised no softening influence on the mind of this young man, who could not understand why the one treasure for which he languished should be denied to him. He could not be generous or just towards the woman who had fooled him with false hopes, and then left him to despair; he could not have pity upon the childish creature who had wandered unawares upon the flowery margin of a hideous gulf, and had fled, aghast and horrified, at the first glimpse of the yawning depths below.

No; his anger against Isabel could not have been more intense had she been a hardened and practised coquette who had deliberately lured him to his ruin.

"I suppose this is what the world calls a virtuous woman," he cried, bitterly. "I daresay Lucretia was this sort of person; and dropped her eyelids to show-off the dark lashes, and made the most of her tapering arms over the spinning-wheel, and summoned conscious blushes into her cheeks when Tarquin looked at her. These virtuous women delight in clamour and scandal. I've no doubt Mrs. Gilbert profoundly enjoyed herself during our rencontre in the church, and went away proud of the havoc she had made in me—the haggard lines about my mouth, and the caverns under my eyes."

You see, Mr. Lansdell could be very brutal sometimes, when he thought of the woman whose weak hand had so completely shattered the airy palace he had built for himself. There is perhaps a good deal of the savage past lurking under the civilised present. Scratch the fine gentleman's waistcoat, and you may come upon the

brindled hide of the tiger. He could not forgive her. Had he not fought against the temptation which her love—so naïvely confessed in every look and tone—had offered to him? had he not fought the good fight of honour, bravely and manfully, as he himself believed, only to succumb at last; and when vanquished, to find that there had been no need for any battle at all? He thought of the life which he had planned for himself and the woman he loved; the bright erratic existence, spent wherever the earth was loveliest. A thousand schemes that he had built in that romantic future faded away, like Mireille's phantom city, beneath the withering influence of this woman's pitiful cowardice.

"It is *not* because she is a good woman, it is not because she loves her husband, that she refuses to listen to me," he thought; "it is only a paltry provincial terror of an esclandre that ties her to this wretched place. And when she has broken my heart, and when she has ruined my life, she goes to church at Hurstonleigh, and sits in a devotional pose, with her big eyes lifted up to the

parson's face, like a Madonna by Giorgione, in order that she may rehabilitate herself in the consideration of Graybridge."

He could neither be just nor patient. Sometimes he laughed aloud at his own folly. Was he, who had prided himself on his cynical disbelief in the depth or endurance of any emotion—was he the man to go mad for love of a pale face and darkly pensive eyes? Ah, yes! it is just these scoffers who take the fever most deeply, when the infection seizes them. Venus, the implacable goddess, mocked so long by the lip of the scorner, attaches herself at last to her prey; and the victim succumbs all at once, aghast and confounded, and acknowledges her awful power. The beautiful smiling creature, so fair to look upon, newly arisen out of the sunlit waters, with dripping hair and rosy limbs, is transformed all at once into a Nemesis, from whose dread sentence there is no escape.

"I—I, who have lived my life out, as I thought, wherever life is most worth living,—I suffer like this at last for the sake of a village surgeon's half-educated wife? I—who have given

myself the airs of a Lauzun or a Brummel—am perishing for the love of a woman who doesn't even know how to put on her gloves!"

Every day Mr. Lansdell resolved to leave Midlandshire to-morrow; but to-morrow found him still lingering at the Priory in a hopeless, purposeless way,—lingering for he knew not what,—lingering, perhaps, for want of the mere physical energy required for the brief effort of departure. He would go to Constantinople overland; there would be more fatigue in the journey that way. Might not a walk across Mount Cenis cure him of his foolish love for Isabel Gilbert? Did not D'Alembert retire from the world and all its troubles into the peaceful pleasures of geometry? Did not Goethe seek relief from some great sorrow in the study of a new language? Roland Lansdell made a faint effort to acquire the Arabic alphabet during those wretched idle days and nights at Mordred. He would study the Semitic languages: all of them. He would go in for the Book of Job. Many people had got plenty of hard work out of the Book of Job. But the curly

little characters in the Arabic alphabet slipped out of Mr. Lansdell's brain as if they had been so many lively young serpents; and he only made so much headway in the attainment of the Semitic languages as enabled him to scrawl an Arabic rendering of Isabel Gilbert's name over the leaves of a blotting-book. He was in love. No schoolboy, bewitched by a pretty blue-eyed, blue-ribboned, white-robed partner at a dancing-school, was ever more foolishly in love than the young squire of Mordred, who had filled a whole volume with various metrical versions of his profound contempt for his species in general, and the feminine portion of them in particular. He had set up that gladsome halloo before he was safely out of the wood; and now he found to his cost that he had been premature; for lo, the dense forest hemmed him in on every side, and there seemed no way of escape out of the sombre labyrinth.

George Gilbert had been ill nearly a fortnight, and the master of Mordred Priory still lingered in Midlandshire. He had heard nothing of the sur-

geon's illness, for he had never been much given to gossipping with his body-servant; and that gentleman was especially disinclined to offer his master any unasked-for information just now; for, as he expressed himself in the servants' hall, "Mr. Lansdell's been in a devil of a temper almost ever since we come back to the Priory; and you might as lief talk to a tiger as speak to him, except when you're spoken to, and goodness knows *that* ain't very often; for any thing so gloomy as his ways has become of late, I never remember to have met with; and if it wasn't that the remuneration is high, and the perquisites never greasy about the elbows, or frayed at the edges,—which I've been with a member of the peerage that wore his clothes till they was shameful shabby,—it wouldn't be very long as I should trouble this dismal old dungeon with my presence."

Only from Lady Gwendoline was Roland likely to hear of George Gilbert's illness; and he had not been to Lowlands lately. He had a vague idea that he would go there some morning, and ask his cousin to marry him, and so make

an end of it: but he deferred the carrying out of that idea indefinitely, as a man who contemplates suicide may postpone the ghastly realisation of his purpose, keeping his loaded pistol or his prussic acid handy against the time when it shall be wanted. He had never ridden past the surgeon's house since that day on which he had seen Isabel seated in the parlour. He had indeed shunned Graybridge and the Graybridge road altogether.

"She shall not triumph in the idea that I pursue her," he thought; "her vain shallow heart shall not be gratified by the knowledge of my pitiful weakness. I bared my foolish breast before her once, and she sat in her pew playing at devotion, and let me go away with my despair. She might have thrown herself in my way that afternoon, if only for a few moments. She might have spoken to me, if only half-a-dozen commonplace words of comfort; but it pleased her better to exhibit her piety. I daresay she knows as well as I do how that devotional air harmonises with her beauty;

and she went home happy, no doubt, in the knowledge that she had made one man miserable. And that's the sort of woman whom the world calls virtuous,—a creature in whom vanity is strong enough to usurp the place of every other passion. For a really good woman, for a true-hearted wife who loves her husband, and before whose quiet presence the veriest libertine bows his head abashed and reverent,—for such a woman as that I have no feeling but respect and admiration; but I hate and despise these sentimental coquettes, who preach secondhand platonism, borrowed from the pages of a poet who at his best was ten times more immoral than the author of Don Juan at his worst."

But it was not always that Roland Lansdell was thus bitter against the woman he loved. Sometimes in the midst of his rage and anger a sudden current of tenderness swept across the dark waters of his soul, and for a little while the image of Isabel Gilbert appeared to him in its true colours. He saw her as she really was; foolish, but not base; weak, but not hypocritical;

sentimental, and with some blemish of womanly vanity perhaps, but not designing. Sometimes amidst all contending emotions, in which passion, and selfishness, and wounded pride, and mortified vanity made a very whirlpool of bitter feeling,—sometimes amidst such baser emotions as these, true love—the sublime, the clear-sighted—arose for a brief interval triumphant, and Roland Lansdell thought tenderly of the woman who had shattered his future.

"My poor little girl,—my poor innocent childish love," he thought, in these moments of purer feeling; "if I could only be noble, and go away, and forgive you, and leave you to grow into a good woman, with that well-meaning commonplace husband, whom it is your duty to honour and obey. Good heavens! I have heard and read of men whose lives were one long sacrifice, who never knew what it was to win the peculiar object of their desires, who were perpetual Abrahams for ever offering new Isaacs on the altar of an insatiable deity, and who derived a kind of happiness after all,—a subli-

mated ethereal joy,—from the pangs of their martyrdom. Surely there are Trappists in May Fair as well as amid the sombre mountain-tops of Valombrosa; men who are dumb for ever as regards the only words they *want* to speak; galley-slaves, who go about smiling, galled by invisible chains, and bound eternally to a companion they loathe; men who never know what it is to speak their own words, or take their own pleasure, who live perpetually under the eye of a *garde-chiourme*, and are awakened out of every peaceful slumber by the striking of the cruel hammer with which he tests the strength of their irons. There are creatures who begin the experience of suffering with the first letters of their alphabet, who are drudges at a cheap school, servitors at college, bear-leaders to a snob who insults and humiliates them; tied hand and foot by the wants of a half-starved mother and ravenous younger brothers, and helpless, penniless sisters; in love, and with not so much as daily bread to offer to the woman they love; obliged to stand aloof and stifle the noblest feelings of their hearts, while a meaner man wins

and misuses the prize that for them would have made all the earth glorious; compelled at last, for the sake of other people, to marry a woman they despise, and who are brave enough to keep the secret of their contempt for ever, and do their duty to the last; going down to the grave under the pressure of perpetual drudgery; never, never, never knowing what it is to have a single wish gratified while the bloom is on it; doomed to disgrace a new coat by a shabby hat, a decent hat by doubtful boots: never in any one object of life realising the complete or the beautiful. There are such men as these; and here am I, who have outbid the Marquis of Lambethia for a Murillo at Christie's: I, who never knew what sorrow was till my mother died, and who fret myself to death like a sick tiger, because the woman I love is refused to me!"

Nothing could be more irregular than Mr. Lansdell's habits during this period. The cook at Mordred declared that such a thing as a *soufflé* was a simple impossibility with an employer who might require his dinner served at any time be-

tween the hours of seven and nine. The fish was flabby, the joints were leathery; and all the hot-water reservoirs in the Mordred dinner-service could not preserve the cook's most special *plats* from stagnation. That worthy artist shrugged his shoulders over the ruins of his work, and turned his attention to the composition of a *menu* in which the best things were to be eaten cold. He might have spared himself the trouble. The young man, who, naturally careless as to what he ate, had, out of pure affectation, been wont to outrival the insolence of the oldest *bon-vivants*, now scarcely knew the nature of the dishes that were set before him. He ate and drank mechanically; and it may be drank a little deeper than he had been accustomed to drink of the famous clarets his father and grandfather had collected. But eating delighted him not, nor drinking neither. The wine had no exhilarating effect upon him; he sat dull and gloomy after a magnum of the famous claret—sat with the Arabic grammar open before him, wondering what was to become of him, now that his life was done.

He was sitting thus in the library, with the sombre Rembrandt face that was something like his own looking gravely down upon him; he was sitting thus by the lamplit table one sultry June evening, when George Gilbert had been ill nearly a fortnight. The light of the lamp—a soft subdued light, shining dimly through a great moon-like orb of thick ground-glass—fell chiefly on the open book, and left the student's face in shadow. But even in that shadow the face looked wan and haggard, and the something that lurked somewhere in all the Lansdell portraits—the something that you may see in every picture of Charles the First of England and Marie Antoinette of France, whensoever and by whomsoever painted—was very visible in Roland's face to-night. He had been sitting brooding over his books, but scarcely reading half-a-dozen pages, ever since nine o'clock, and it was now half-past eleven. He was stretching his hand towards the bell in order to summon his valet, and release that personage from the task of sitting up any longer, yawning alone in the housekeeper's room,—for the habits of Mordred

Priory had never lost the sobriety of Lady Anna Lansdell's regime, and all the servants except Roland's valet went to bed at eleven,—when that gentleman entered the library.

"Would you please to see any one, sir?" he asked.

"Would I please to see any one?" cried Roland, turning in his low easy-chair, and staring at the solemn face of his valet; "who should want to see me at such a time of night? Is there any thing wrong? Is it any one from—from Lowlands?"

"No, sir, it's a strange lady; leastways, when I say a strange lady, I *think*, sir,—though, her veil being down, and a very thick veil, I should not like to speak positive,—I think it's Mrs. Gilbert, the doctor's lady, from Graybridge."

Mr. Lansdell's valet coughed doubtfully behind his hand, and looked discreetly at the carved oaken bosses in the ceiling. Roland started to his feet.

"Mrs. Gilbert," he muttered, "at such an hour as this! It can't be; she would never—Show the lady here, whoever she is," he added

aloud to his servant. "There must be something wrong; it must be some very important business that brings any one to this place to-night."

The valet departed, closing the door behind him, and Roland stood alone upon the hearth, waiting for his late visitor. All the warmer tints—he never had what people call "a colour"—faded out of his face, and left him very pale. Why had she come to him at such a time? What purpose could she have in coming to that house save one? She had come to revoke her decision. For a moment a flood of rapture swept into his soul, warm and revivifying as the glory of a sudden sunburst on a dull gray autumn day; but in the next moment,—so strange and subtle an emotion is that which we call love,—a chill sense of regret crept into his mind, and he was almost sorry that Isabel should come to him thus, even though she were to bring him the promise of future happiness.

"My poor ignorant, innocent girl—how hard it seems that my love must for ever place her at a disadvantage!" he thought.

The door was opened by the valet, with as bold a sweep as if a duchess had been entering in all the glory of her court-robes, and Isabel came into the room. One glance showed Mr. Lansdell that she was very nervous, that she was suffering cruelly from the terror of his presence; and it may be that even before she had spoken he understood that she had not come to announce any change in her decision, any modification of the sentiments that had led to their parting at Thurston's Crag. There was nothing desperate in her manner—nothing of the dramatic *aplomb* that belongs to the grand crises of life. She stood before him pale and irresolute, with pleading eyes lifted meekly to his face.

Mr. Lansdell wheeled forward a chair, but he was obliged to ask her to sit down; and even then she seated herself with the kind of timid irresolution he had so often seen in a burly farmer come to supplicate abnormal advantages in the renewal of a lease.

"I hope you are not angry with me for coming here at such a time," she said, in a low tre-

mulous voice; "I could not come any earlier, or I—"

"It can never be any thing but a pleasure to me to see you," Roland answered gravely, "even though the pleasure is strangely mingled with pain. You have come to me, perhaps, because you are in some kind of trouble, and have need of my services in some way or other. I am very much pleased to think that you can so far confide in me; I am very glad to think you can rely on my friendship."

Mr. Lansdell said this because he saw that the doctor's wife had come to demand some favour at his hands, and he wished to smooth the way for that demand. Isabel looked up at him with something like surprise in her gaze. She had not expected that he would be like this—calm, self-possessed, reasonable. A mournful feeling took possession of her heart. She thought that his love must have perished altogether, or he could not surely have been so kind to her, so gentle and dispassionate. She looked at him furtively as he lounged against the further angle of the massive

mantelpiece. His transient passion had worn itself out, no doubt, and he was deep in the tumultuous ocean of a new love-affair,—a glittering duchess, a dark-eyed Clotilde,—some brilliant creature after one of the numerous models in the pages of the "Alien."

"You are very, very good not to be angry with me," she said; "I have come to ask you a favour—a very great favour—and I—"

She stopped, and sat silently twisting the handle of her parasol—the old green parasol under whose shadow Roland had so often seen her. It was quite evident that her courage had failed her altogether at this crisis.

"It is not for myself I am going to ask you this favour," she said, still hesitating, and looking down at the parasol; "it is for another person, who—it is a secret, in fact, and—"

"Whatever it is, it shall be granted," Roland answered, "without question, without comment."

"I have come to ask you to lend me,—or at least I had better ask you to give it me, for indeed I don't know when I should ever be able to repay

it,—some money, a great deal of money,—fifty pounds."

She looked at him as if she thought the magnitude of the sum must inevitably astonish him, and she saw a tender half-melancholy smile upon his face.

"My dear Isabel—my dear Mrs. Gilbert—if all the money I possess in the world could secure you happiness, I would willingly leave Midlandshire to-morrow a penniless man. I would not for the world that you should be embarrassed for an hour, while I have more money than I know what to do with. I will write you a cheque immediately, —or, better still, half-a-dozen blank cheques, which you can fill up as you require them."

But Isabel shook her head at this proposal. "You are very kind," she said; "but a cheque would not do. It must be money, if you please; the person for whom I want it would not take a cheque."

Roland Lansdell looked at her with a sudden expression of doubt,—of something that was almost terror in his face.

"The person for whom you want it," he repeated. "It is not for yourself, then, that you want this money?"

"Oh, no, indeed. What should I want with so much money?"

"I thought you might be in debt. I thought that— Ah, I see; it is for your husband that you want the money."

"Oh, no: my husband knows nothing about it. But, oh, pray, pray don't question me. Ah, if you knew how much I suffered before I came here to-night! If there had been any other person in the world who could have helped me, I would never have come here; but there is no one, and I *must* get the money."

Roland's face grew darker as Mrs. Gilbert spoke. Her agitation, her earnestness, mystified and alarmed him.

"Isabel," he cried, "God knows I have little right to question you; but there is something in the manner of your request that alarms me. Can you doubt that I am your friend,—next to your husband your best and truest friend,

perhaps?—forget every word that I have ever said to you, and believe only what I say to-night —to-night, when all my better feelings are aroused by the sight of you. Believe that I am your friend, Isabel, and for pity's sake trust me. Who is this person who wants money of you? Is it your stepmother? if so, my cheque-book is at her disposal."

"No," faltered the Doctor's Wife, "it is not for my stepmother, but—"

"But it is for some member of your family?"

"Yes," she answered, drawing a long breath; "but, oh, pray do not ask me any more questions. You said just now that you would grant me the favour I asked without question or comment. Ah, if you knew how painful it was to me to come here!"

"Indeed! I am sorry that it was so painful to you to trust me."

"Ah, if you knew—" Isabel murmured in a low voice, speaking to herself rather than to Roland.

Mr. Lansdell took a little bunch of keys from

his pocket, and went across the room to an iron safe, cunningly fashioned after the presentment of an antique ebony cabinet. He opened the ponderous door, and took a little cashbox from one of the shelves.

"My steward brought me a bundle of notes yesterday. Will you take what you want?" he asked, handing the open box to Isabel.

"I would rather you gave me the money; I do not want more than fifty pounds."

Roland counted five ten-pound notes and handed them to Isabel. She rose and stood for a few moments, hesitating as if she had something more to say,—something almost as embarrassing in its nature as the money-question had been.

"I—I hope you will not think me troublesome," she said; "but there is one more favour that I want to ask of you."

"Do not hesitate to ask any thing of me; all I want is your confidence."

"It is only a question that I wish to ask. You talked some time since of going away from

Midlandshire—from England; do you still think of doing so?"

"Yes, my plans are all made for an early departure."

"A very early departure? You are going almost immediately?"

"Immediately,—to-morrow perhaps. I am going to the East. It may be a long time before I return to England."

There was a little pause, during which Roland saw that a faint flush kindled in Isabel Gilbert's face, and that her breath came and went rather quicker than before.

"Then I must say good-by to-night," she said.

"Yes, it is not likely we shall meet again. Good-night—good-by. Perhaps some day, when I am a pottering old man, telling people the same anecdotes every time I dine with them, I shall come back to Midlandshire, and find Mr. Gilbert a crack physician in Kylmington, petted by rich old ladies, and riding in a yellow barouche;—till then, good-by."

He held Isabel's hand for a few moments,—not pressing it ever so gently,—only holding it, as if in that frail tenure he held the last link that bound him to love and life. Isabel looked at him wonderingly. How different was this adieu from that passionate farewell under Lord Thurston's oak, when he had flung himself upon the ground and wept aloud in the anguish of parting from her! The melodramas she had witnessed at the Surrey Theatre were evidently true to nature. Nothing could be more transient than the wicked squire's love.

"Only one word more, Mrs. Gilbert," Roland said, after that brief pause. "Your husband—does he know about this person who asks for money from you?"

"No—I—I should have told him—I think—and asked him to give me the money, only he is so very ill; he must not be troubled about any thing."

"He is very ill—your husband is ill?"

"Yes,—I thought every one knew. He is very, very ill. It is on that account I came here

so late. I have been sitting in his room all day. Good-night."

"But you cannot go back alone; it is such a long way. It will be two o'clock in the morning before you can get back to Graybridge. I will drive you home; or it will be better to let my coachman — my mother's old coachman — drive you home."

It was in vain that Mrs. Gilbert protested against this arrangement. Roland Lansdell reflected that as the doctor's wife had been admitted by his valet, her visit would of course be patent to all the other servants at their next morning's breakfast. Under these circumstances Mrs. Gilbert could not leave Mordred with too much publicity; and a steady old man, who had driven Lady Anna Lansdell's fat white horses for slow jogtrot drives along the shady highways and byways of Midlandshire, was aroused from his peaceful slumbers and told to dress himself, while a half-somnolent stable-boy brought out a big bay horse and an old-fashioned brougham. In this vehicle Isabel returned very comfortably to Graybridge; but she

begged the coachman to stop at the top of the lane, where she alighted and bade him good-night.

She found all dark in the little surgery, which she entered by means of her husband's latch-key; and she crept softly up the stairs to the room opposite that in which George Gilbert lay, watched over by Mrs. Jeffson.

CHAPTER VII.

"I'LL NOT BELIEVE BUT DESDEMONA'S HONEST."

"SEE that some hothouse grapes and a pine are sent to Mr. Gilbert at Graybridge," Roland said to his valet on the morning after Isabel's visit. "I was very sorry to hear of his serious illness from his wife last night."

Mr. Lansdell's valet, very busily occupied with a hatbrush, smiled softly to himself as his employer made this speech. The master of Mordred Priory need scarcely have stained his erring soul by any hypocritical phrases respecting the Graybridge surgeon.

"I shouldn't mind laying a twelvemonth's wages that if her husband dies, he marries her within six months," Roland's man-servant remarked, as he sipped his second cup of coffee; "I never did see such an infatuated young man in all my life."

A change came over the spirit of Mr. Lansdell's dreams. The thought, the base and cruel thought, which had never entered Isabel's mind, was not to be shut out of Roland's breast after that midnight interview in the library. Do what he would, struggle against the foul temptation as he might,—and he was not naturally wicked, he was not utterly heartless,—he could not help thinking of what might happen—if—if Death, who carries in his fleshless hand so many orders for release, should cut the knot that bound Isabel Gilbert.

"God knows I am not base enough to wish any harm to that poor fellow at Graybridge," thought Mr. Lansdell; "but if—"

And then the Tempter's hand swept aside a dark curtain, and revealed a lovely picture of the life that might be, if George Gilbert would only be so obliging as to sink under that tiresome low fever which had done so much mischief in the lanes about Graybridge. Roland Lansdell was not a hero; he was only a very imperfect, vacillating young man, with noble impulses for ever

warring against the baser attributes of his mind; a spoiled child of fortune, who had almost always had his own way until just now.

"I ought to go away," he thought; "I ought to go away all the more because of this man's illness. There seems something horrible in my stopping here watching and waiting for the result, when I should gain such an unutterable treasure by George Gilbert's death."

But he lingered, nevertheless. A man may fully appreciate the enormity of his sin, and yet go on sinning. Mr. Lansdell did not go away from Mordred; he contented himself with sending the Graybridge surgeon a basket of the finest grapes and a couple of the biggest pines to be found in the Priory hothouses; and it may be that his conscience derived some small solace from the performance of this courtesy.

Lord Ruysdale called upon his nephew in the course of the bright summer morning that succeeded Isabel's visit to the Priory; and as the young man happened to be smoking his cigar in front of the porch at the moment when the Earl's

quiet cob came jogging along the broad carriage-drive, there was no possibility of avoiding the elderly gentleman's visit. Roland threw aside his cigar, and resigned himself to the prospect of an hour's prosy discussion of things in which he felt no kind of interest, no ray of pleasure. What was it to him that there was every prospect of a speedy dissolution, unless— ? There almost always was every prospect of a dissolution unless something or other took place; but nothing special ever seemed to come of all the fuss and clamour. The poor people were always poor, and grumbled at being starved to death; the rich people were always rich, and indignant against the oppression of an exorbitant income-tax. Poor Roland behaved admirably during the infliction of his uncle's visit; and if he gave vague answers and asked irrelevant questions now and then, Lord Ruysdale was too much engrossed by his own eloquence to find out his nephew's delinquencies. Roland only got rid of him at last by promising to dine at Lowlands that evening.

"If there's a dissolution, our party must in-

evitably come in," the Earl said at parting; "and in that case you must stand for Wareham. The Wareham people look to you as their legitimate representative. I look forward to great things, my boy, if the present ministry go out. I've been nursing my little exchequer very comfortably for the last twelve months; and I shall take a furnished house in town, and begin life again next year, if things go well; and I expect to see you make a figure in the world yet, Roland."

And in all that interview Lord Ruysdale did not once remark the tired look in his nephew's face; that nameless look which gave a sombre cast to all the Lansdell portraits, and which made the *blasé* idler of thirty seem older of aspect than the hopeful country gentleman of sixty.

Rowland went to Lowlands in the evening. Why should he not do this to please his uncle? inasmuch as it mattered so very little what he did, or where he went, in a universe where every thing was weariness. He found Lady Gwendoline in the drawing-room, looking something like Marie

Antoinette in a *demi-toilette* of gray silk, with a black-lace scarf crossed upon her stately shoulders, and tied in a careless bow at the back of her waist. Mr. Raymond was established in a big chintz-covered easy-chair, turning over a box of books newly arrived from London, and muttering scornful comments on their titles and contents.

"At last!" he exclaimed, as Mr. Lansdell's name was announced. "I've called at Mordred about half-a-dozen times within the last two months; but as your people always said you were out, and as I could always see by their faces that you were at home, I have given up the business in despair."

Lord Ruysdale came in presently with the *Times* newspaper open in his hand, and insisted on reading a leader, which he delivered with amazing energy, and all the emphasis on the beginnings of the sentences. Dinner was announced before the leader was finished, and Mr. Raymond led Lady Gwendoline to the dining-room, while Roland stayed to hear the Thunderer's climax murdered by his uncle's defective elocution. The

dinner went off very quietly. The Earl talked politics, and Mr. Raymond discoursed very pleasantly on the principles of natural philosophy as applied to the rulers of the nation. There was a strange contrast between the animal spirits of the two men who had passed the meridian of life, and were jogging quietly on the shady slope of the hill, and the dreamy languor exhibited by the two young people who sat listening to them. George Sand has declared that nowadays all the oldest books are written by the youngest authors; might she not go even further, and say that nowadays the young people are older than their seniors? We have got rid of our Springheeled Jacks and John Mittons, and Tom and Jerry are no more popular either on or off the stage: our young aristocrats no longer think it a fine thing to drive a hearse to Epsom races, or to set barrels of wine running in the Haymarket; but in place of all this foolish riot and confusion a mortal coldness of the soul seems to have come down upon the youth of our nation, a deadly languor and stagnation of spirit, from which nothing less than a Crimean war or an In-

dian rebellion can arouse the worn-out idlers in a weary world.

The dinner was drawing to a close, when Lord Ruysdale mentioned a name that awakened all Mr. Lansdell's attention.

"I rode into Graybridge after leaving you, Roland," he said, "and made a call or two. I was sorry to hear that Mr. Gilmore—Gilson—Gilbert,—ah, yes, Gilbert,—that very worthy young doctor, whom we met at your house the other day—last year, by the by—Egad, how the time spins round!—I was sorry to hear that he is ill. Low fever—really in a very dangerous state, Saunders the solicitor told me. *You'll* be sorry to hear it, Gwendoline."

Lady Gwendoline's face darkened, and she glanced at Roland before she spoke.

"I am sorry to hear it," she said. "I am sorry for Mr. Gilbert, for more than one reason. I am sorry he has so very bad a wife."

Roland's face flushed crimson, and he turned to his cousin as if about to speak; but Mr. Raymond was too quick for him.

"I think the less we say upon that subject the better," he exclaimed eagerly; "I think, Lady Gwendoline, that is a subject that had much better not be discussed here."

"Why should it not be discussed?" cried Roland, looking—if people can look daggers—a perfect arsenal of rage and scorn at his cousin. "Of course, we understand that slander of her own sex is a woman's privilege. Why should not Lady Gwendoline avail herself of her special right? Here is only a very paltry subject, certainly—a poor little provincial nobody; but she will serve for want of a better: lay her on the table, by all means, and bring out your dissecting-tools, Lady Gwendoline. What have you to say against Mrs. Gilbert?" He waited, breathless and angry, for his cousin's answer, looking at her with sullen defiance in his face.

"Perhaps Mr. Raymond is right, after all," Gwendoline said quietly. She was very quiet, but very pale, and looked her cousin as steadily in the eyes as if she had been fighting a small-sword duel with him. "The subject is one that will

scarcely bear discussion here or elsewhere; but since you accuse me of feminine malice, I am bound to defend myself. I say that Mrs. Gilbert is a very bad wife and a very wicked woman. A person who is seen to attend a secret rendezvous with a stranger, not once, but several times, with all appearance of stealth and mystery, while her husband lies between life and death, must surely be one of the worst and vilest of women."

Mr. Lansdell burst into a discordant laugh.

"What a place this Midlandshire is!" he cried; "and what a miraculous power of invention lies uncultivated amongst the inhabitants of our country towns! I withdraw any impertinent insinuations about your talent for scandal, my dear Gwendoline; for I see you are the merest novice in that subtle art. The smallest rudimentary knowledge would teach you to distinguish between the stories that are *ben trovato* and those that are not; their being true or false is not of the least consequence. Unfortunately, this Graybridge slander is one of the very lamest of canards. A newspaper correspondent sending it in to fill the bottom

of a column would be dismissed for incompetency, on the strength of his blunder. Tell your maid to be a little more circumspect in future, Gwendoline."

Lady Gwendoline did not condescend to discuss the truth or probability of her story. She saw that her cousin was ashy pale to the lips, and she knew that her shot had gone home to the very centre of the bull's-eye. After this there was very little conversation. Lord Ruysdale started one or two of his favourite topics; but he understood dimly that there was something not quite pleasant at work amongst his companions. Roland sat frowning at his plate; and Charles Raymond watched him with an uneasy expression in his face; as a man who is afraid of lightning might watch the gathering of a storm-cloud. The dinner drew to a close amidst dense gloom and awful silence, dismally broken by the faint chinking of spoons and jingling of glass. Ah, what funeral-bell can fall more solemnly upon the ear than those common everyday sounds amidst the awful stillness that succeeds or precedes a domestic tempest!

There is nothing very terrible in the twittering of birds; yet how ominous sound the voices of those innocent feathered warblers in the dread pauses of a storm!

Lady Gwendoline rose from the table when her father filled his second glass of Burgundy, and Mr. Raymond hurried to open the door for her. But Roland's eyes were never lifted from his empty plate; he was waiting for something: now and then a little convulsive movement of his lower lip betrayed that he was agitated; but that was all.

Lord Ruysdale seemed relieved by his daughter's departure. He had a vague idea that there had been some little passage-at-arms between Roland and Gwendoline, and fancied that serenity would be restored by the lady's absence. He went twaddling on with his vapid discourse upon the state of the political atmosphere, placid as some babbling stream, until the dusky shadows began to gather in the corners of the low old-fashioned chamber. Then the Earl pulled out a fat ponderous old hunter, and exclaimed at the lateness of the hour.

"I've some letters to write that must go by to-night's post," he said. "Raymond, I know you'll excuse me if I leave you for an hour or so. Roland, I expect you and Raymond to do justice to that Chambertin."

Charles Raymond murmured some polite little conventionality as the Earl left the room; but he never removed his eyes from Roland's face. He had watched the brewing of the storm, and was prepared for a speedy thunder-clap. Nor was he mistaken in his calculations.

"Raymond, is this true?" Mr. Lansdell asked, as the door closed upon his uncle. He spoke as if there had been no break or change in the conversation since Mrs. Gilbert's name had been mentioned.

"Is what true, Roland?"

"This dastardly slander against Isabel Gilbert. Is it true? Pshaw! I know that it is not. But I want to know if there is any shadow of an excuse for such a scandal. Don't trifle with me, Raymond; I have kept no secrets from you; and I have a right to expect that you will be candid with me."

"I do not think you have any right to question me upon this subject," Mr. Raymond answered, very gravely: "when last it was mentioned between us, you rejected my advice, and protested against my further interference in your affairs. I thought we finished with the subject then, Roland, at your request; and I certainly do not care to renew it now."

"But things have changed since then," Mr. Lansdell said, eagerly. "It is only common justice to Mrs. Gilbert that I should tell you as much as that, Raymond. I was very confident, very presumptuous, I suppose, when I last discussed this business with you. It is only fair that you should know that the schemes I had formed, when I came back to England, have been entirely frustrated by Mrs. Gilbert herself."

"I am very glad to hear it."

There was very little real gladness in Mr. Raymond's tone as he said this; and the uneasy expression with which he had watched Roland for the last hour was, if any thing, intensified now.

"Yes; I miscalculated when I built all those

grand schemes for a happy future. It is not so easy to persuade a good woman to run away from her husband, however intolerable may be the chain that binds her to him. These provincial wives accept the marriage-service in its sternest sense. Mrs. Gilbert is a good woman. You can imagine, therefore, how bitterly I felt Gwendoline's imputations against her. I suppose these women really derive some kind of pleasure from one another's destruction. And now set my mind quite at rest: there is not one particle of truth—not so much as can serve as the foundation for a lie—in this accusation, is there, Raymond?"

If the answer to this question had involved a sentence of death, or a reprieve from the gallows, Roland Lansdell could not have asked it more eagerly. He ought to have believed in Isabel so firmly as to be quite unmoved by any village slander; but he loved her too much to be reasonable: Jealousy the demon—closely united as a Siamese twin to Love the god—was already gnawing at his entrails. It could not be, it could not

be, that she had deceived and deluded him: but *if* she had—ah, what baseness, what treachery!

"*Is* there any truth in it, Raymond?" he repeated, rising from his chair, and glowering across the table at his kinsman.

"I decline to answer that question. I have nothing to do with Mrs. Gilbert, or with any reports that may be circulated against her."

"But I insist upon you telling me all you know; or, if you refuse to do so, I will go to Lady Gwendoline, and obtain the truth from her."

Mr. Raymond shrugged his shoulders, as if he would have said, "All further argument is useless; this demented creature must go to perdition his own way."

"You are a very obstinate young man, Roland," he said aloud; "and I am very sorry you ever made the acquaintance of this Doctor's Wife, than whom there are scores of prettier women to be met with in any summer-day's walk; but I daresay there were prettier women than Helen, if it comes to that. However, as you insist upon hear-

ing the whole of this village scandal—which may or may not be true—you must have your own way; and I hope, when you have heard it, you will be contented to turn your back for some time to come upon Midlandshire and Mrs. George Gilbert. I *have* heard something of the story Lady Gwendoline told you at dinner; and from a tolerably reliable source. I have heard—"

"What? That she—that Isabel has been seen with some stranger?"

"Yes."

"With whom? when? where?"

"There is a strange man staying at a little rustic tavern in Nessborough Hollow. You know what gossips these country people are: Heaven knows I have never put myself out of the way to learn other people's business; but these things get bruited about in all manner of places."

Roland chafed impatiently during this brief digression.

"Tell your story plainly, Raymond," he said. "There is a strange man staying in Nessborough Hollow—well; what then?"

"He is rather a handsome-looking fellow; flashily dressed—a Londoner, evidently—and—"

"But what has all this to do with Mrs. Gilbert?"

"Only this much,—she has been seen walking alone with this man, after dark, in Nessborough Hollow."

"It must be a lie; a villanous invention! or if—if she has been seen to meet this man, he is some relation. Yes, I have reason to think that she has some relation staying in this neighbourhood."

"But why, in that case, should she meet the man secretly, at such an hour, while her husband is lying ill?"

"There might be a hundred reasons."

Mr. Raymond shrugged his shoulders. "Can you suggest one?" he asked.

Roland Lansdell's head sank forward on his breast. No; he could think of no reason why Isabel Gilbert should meet this stranger secretly —unless there were some kind of guilt involved in their association. Secrecy and guilt go so per-

petually together, that it is almost difficult for the mind to dissever them.

"But *has* she been seen to meet him?" cried Roland, suddenly. "No; I will not believe it. Some woman has been seen walking with some man; and the Graybridge vultures, eager to swoop down upon my poor innocent dove, must have it that the woman is Isabel Gilbert. No: I will not believe this story."

"So be it, then," answered Mr. Raymond. "In that case we can drop the subject."

But Roland was not so easily to be satisfied. The poisoned arrow had entered far into his soul, and he must needs drag the cruel barb backwards and forwards in the wound.

"Not till you have given me the name of your authority," he said.

"Pshaw! my dear Roland, have I not already told you that my authority is the common Graybridge gossip?"

"I'll not believe that. You are the last man in the world to be influenced by paltry village scandal. You have better grounds for what you

told me. Some one has seen Isabel and this man. Who was that person?"

"I protest against this cross-examination. I have been weak enough to sympathise with a dishonourable attachment, so far as to wish to spare you pain. You refuse to be spared, and must take the consequences of your own obstinacy. *I* was the person who saw Isabel Gilbert walking with a stranger—a showily-dressed, disreputable-looking fellow—in Nessborough Hollow. I had been dining with Hardwick the lawyer at Graybridge, and rode home across country by the Briargate and Hurstonleigh Road, instead of going through Waverly. I heard the scandal about Mrs. Gilbert at Graybridge,—heard her name linked with that of some stranger staying at the Leicester Arms, Nessborough Hollow, who had been known to send letters to her and to meet her after dark. Heaven only knows how country people find out these things; but these things always are discovered somehow or other. I defended Isabel,—I know her head is a good one, though by no means so well-balanced as it might

be,—I defended Isabel throughout a long discussion with the lawyer's wife; but riding home by the Briargate road, I met Mrs. Gilbert walking arm-in-arm with a man who answered to the description I had heard at Graybridge."

"When was this?"

"The night before last. It must have been some time between ten and eleven when I met them; for it was broad moonlight, and I saw Isabel's face as plainly as I see yours."

"And did she recognise you?"

"Yes; and turned abruptly away from the road into the waste grass between the highway and the tall hedgerow beyond."

For some moments after this there was a dead silence, and Raymond saw the young man standing opposite him in the dusk, motionless as a stone figure—white as death. Then after that pause, which seemed so long, Roland stretched out his hand and groped among the decanters and glasses on the table for a water-jug; he filled a goblet with water; and Charles Raymond knew, by the clashing of the glass, that his kinsman's

hand was shaken by a convulsive trembling. After taking a long draught of water, Roland stretched his hand across the table.

"Shake hands, Raymond," he said, in a dull, thick kind of voice; "I thank you heartily for having told me the truth; it was much better to be candid; it was better to let me know the truth. But, oh, if you could know how I loved her—if you could know! You think it was only the dishonourable passion of a profligate, who falls in love with a married woman, and pursues his fancy, heedless of the ruin he may entail on others. But it was not, Raymond; it was nothing like that. So help me Heaven, amidst all selfish sorrow for my own most bitter disappointment, I have sometimes felt a thrill of happiness in the thought that my poor girl's name was still untarnished. I have felt this, in spite of my ruined life, the cruel destruction of every hope that had grown up out of my love for her; and to think that she,—that she who saw my truth and my despair, saw my weak heart laid bare in all its abject folly,—to think that she could

dismiss me with schoolgirl speeches about duty and honour; and then,—then, while my grief was new,—while I still lingered here, too infatuated to leave the place in which I had so cruelly suffered,—to think that she should fall into some low intrigue, some base and secret association with —— It is too bitter, Raymond; it is too bitter!"

The friendly dusk sheltered him as he dropped into a chair and buried his face upon the broad-cushioned elbow. The tears that gathered slowly in his eyes now were even more bitter than those that he had shed two months ago under Lord Thurston's oak. If this sort of thing is involved in a man's being in earnest, he had not need be in earnest about any thing more than once in his life. Happily for us, the power to suffer, like every other power, becomes enfeebled and wears out at last by extravagant usage. If Othello had survived to marry a second time, he would not have dropped down in a fit when a new Iago began to whisper poisonous hints about the lady.

"I never loved any one but her," murmured

Roland Lansdell; "I have been a hard judge of other women; but I believed in her."

"My poor boy, my poor impetuous Roland," Mr. Raymond said softly, "men have to suffer like this once in a lifetime. Fight it out, and have done with it. Look the foul phantasm straight in the eyes, and it will melt into so much empty air; and then 'being gone,' you are 'a man again.' My dear boy, before this year is out, you will be sipping absinth—most abominable stuff!—after a supper at the Maison Dorée, and entertaining your companions with a satirical history of your little caprice for the Doctor's Wife."

"And Heaven forgive me for talking like Major Pendennis, or any other wicked old worldling!" Mr. Raymond added mentally.

Roland Lansdell got up by and by, and walked to the open French window. There was a silvery shimmer of moonlight upon the lawn, and the great clock in the stables was striking ten.

"Good-night, Raymond," said Mr. Lansdell, turning on the threshold of the window. "You

can make some kind of apology for me to my uncle and Gwendoline. I won't stop to say good-night to them."

"But where are you going?"

"To Nessborough Hollow."

"Are you mad, Roland?"

"That's a great deal too subtle a question to be answered just now. I am going to Nessborough Hollow, to see Isabel Gilbert and her lover."

CHAPTER VIII.

KEEPING A PROMISE.

The moon was slowly rising behind a black belt of dense foliage,—a noble screen of elm and beech that sheltered Lord Ruysdale's domain from the common world without,—as Roland Lansdell crossed the lawn, and went in amongst the thickest depths of the park. At Lowlands there were no smooth glades and romantic waterfalls, no wonderful effects of landscape-gardening, such as adorned Mordred Priory. The Earls of Ruysdale had been more or less behind the world for the last century and a half; and the land about the old red-brick mansion was only a tangled depth of forest, in which the deer browsed peacefully, undisturbed by the ruthless handiwork of trim modern improvement.

The lonely wildness of the place suited Roland

Lansdell's mood to-night. At first he had walked very rapidly, even breaking into a run now and then; so feverishly and desperately did he desire to reach the spot where he might perhaps find that which would confirm his despair. But all at once, when he had gone some distance from the house, and the lights in Lady Gwendoline's drawing-room were shut from him by half the width of the park, he stopped suddenly, leaning against a tree, faint and almost breathless. He stopped for the first time to think of what he had heard. The hot passion of anger, the fierce sense of outraged pride, had filled his breast so entirely as to sweep away every softer feeling, as flowers growing near a volcanic mountain may be scattered by the rolling lava-flood that passes over them. Now, for the first time, he lingered a little to reflect upon what he had heard. Could it be true? Could it be that this woman had deceived him,—this woman for whom he had been false to all the teaching of his life,—this woman, at whose feet he had offered up that comfortable philosophy which found an infallible armour

against sorrow in supreme indifference to all things under heaven, — this woman, for whose sake he had consented to reassume the painful heritage of humanity, the faculty of suffering?

"And she is like the rest, after all," he thought; "or only a little worse than the rest. And I had forgotten so much for her sake. I had blotted out the experience of a decade in order that I might believe in the witchery of her dark eyes. I, the man of half-a-dozen seasons in London and Paris, Vienna and St. Petersburg, had sponged away every base record in the book of my memory, so that I might scrawl her name upon the blank pages; and now I am angry with her—with her, poor pitiful creature, who I suppose is only true to her nature when she is base and false. I am angry with her, when I have only my own folly to blame for the whole miserable business. I am angry with *her*, just as if she were a responsible being; as if she *could* be any thing but what she is. And yet there have been good women in the world," he thought, sadly. "My mother was a good woman. I

used to fancy sometimes what might have happened if I had known *her* in my mother's lifetime. I have even made a picture in my mind of the two women, happy together, and loving each other. Heaven forgive me! And after all her pretty talk about platonism and poetry, she betrays me for a low intrigue, and a rendezvous kept at an ale-house."

In all his anger against the Doctor's Wife, no thought of her husband's far deeper wrong ever entered into Mr. Lansdell's mind. It was *he*—Roland—who had been betrayed: it was he whose love was outraged, whose pride was humiliated to the very dust. That there was a man, now lying ill and helpless at Graybridge, who had a better right to resent Isabel Gilbert's treachery, and wreak vengeance upon the unknown wretch for whose sake she was thus base and guilty, never occurred to this angry young man. It had been, for a long time past, his habit to forget George Gilbert's existence; he had resolutely shut from his mind the image of the Graybridge surgeon ever since his return to Midlandshire; ever since

the wrong he was doing against George Gilbert had fallen into a deliberate and persistent course, leading steadily to a foregone conclusion. He had done this, and little by little it had become very easy for him to forget so insignificant and unobtrusive a person as the simple-hearted parish surgeon, whose only sin against mankind was that he had chosen a pretty woman for his wife.

So now it was of his own wrongs, and of those wrongs alone, that Mr. Lansdell thought. All the circumstances of Isabel's visit to the Priory came back to him. Came back? When had they left his mind, except for that brief interval of passion during which his mind had been a chaos?

"The money she wanted was for this man, of course!" he thought. "For whom else should it be? for whom else should she come to ask for money—of her rejected lover—in the dead of the night, with all the mean miserable circumstances of a secret and guilty action? If she had wanted money from me for any legitimate purpose—in any foolish feminine confusion of debt and difficulty—

why should she not have written to me boldly for the sum she required? She must have known that my purse was hers to command whenever she required it. But that she should come secretly, trembling like a guilty creature,—compromising herself and me by a midnight visit,—afraid to confess why she wanted the money,—answering my straight questions by hesitation and prevarication! What construction can I put upon her conduct of last night except one—except one? And yet, even after last night, I believed in her. I thought that she might have wanted the money for some relation. Some relation! What relation should she meet alone, secretly, late at night, in such a place as Nessborough Hollow? She who never, in all the course of our acquaintance, mentioned a living creature beyond her stepmother who had any claim upon her; and all at once some one comes—some one for whom she must have fifty pounds; not in the form of a cheque, which might be traced home to the person who received it. I cannot forget that; I cannot forget that she refused to take my cheque for the money

she wanted. That alone makes a mystery of the business; and the meeting that Raymond witnessed tells all the rest. This strange man is some old lover; some jilted admirer of a bygone era, who comes now and is clamorous and dangerous, and will only be bought-off by a bribe. Oh, shame, shame, shame upon her, and upon my own folly! And I thought her an innocent child, who had ignorantly broken a strong man's heart!"

He walked on slowly now, and with his head bent, no longer trying to make a short cut for himself among the trees, but absently following a narrow winding path worn by slow peasants' feet upon the grass.

"Why should I be so eager to see this man?" he thought. "What can I discover that I do not already know? If there is any one upon earth whose word I can trust in, it is Raymond. He would be the very last to slander this wretched woman, or to be self-deluded by a prejudice; and he saw her—he saw her. And even beyond this, the base intrigue has become common talk. Gwendoline would not have dared to say what she said

to-day without good grounds for her statement. It is only I,—I who have lived apart from all the world to think and dream about her,—it is only I who am the last to be told of her shame. But I will try to see this fellow notwithstanding. I should like to see the man who has been preferred to me."

Nessborough Hollow was some distance from Lowlands; and Mr. Lansdell, who was familiar with almost every inch of his native county, made his way thither by shadowy lanes and rarely trodden byways, where the summer wild-flowers smelt sweetly in the dewy night. Never surely had brighter heavens shone upon a fairer earth. The leaves and blossoms, the long lush-grasses faintly stirred by lazy summer winds, made a perpetual whisper that scarcely broke the general stillness: and now and then the gurgling notes of a nightingale sounded amongst the clustering foliage that loomed darkly above tangled hedgerows, and broad wastes of moonlit grass.

"I wonder why people are not happy," mused Mr. Lansdell, impressed in spite of himself by the

quiet beauty of the summer landscape. Intensely subjective though our natures may be, external things will not be quite put away, strive as we may to shut them out. Did not Fagin think about the broken rail while he stood in the dock, and wonder who would mend it? Was not Manfred, the supremely egotistical and subjective, perpetually dragging the mountain-tops and Alpine streamlets into his talk of his own troubles? So to-night, deeply absorbed though he was by the consciousness of his own wrongs, there was a kind of double action in Roland Lansdell's mind, by means of which he was conscious of every flickering shadow of the honeysuckle blossoms dark upon the silver smoothness of the moonlit grass.

"I wonder how it is that people cannot be happy," he thought; "why can't they take a sensuous pleasure out of this beautiful universe, and enjoy the moonlight, and the shadows, and the perfume of new-mown hay upon the summer air; and then, when they are tired of one set of sensations, move on to another: from rural England

to tropical India; from the southern prairies to the snow-mantled Alps; playing a game at hide-and-seek with the disagreeable seasons, and contriving to go down to the grave through the rosy sunsets of a perpetual summer, indifferent as to who dies or suffers, so long as the beauty of the world endures? Why can't people be reasonable, and take life wisely? I begin to think that Mr. Harold Skimpole was the only true philosopher. If he had been rich enough to indulge his sensuous simplicity out of his own pocket, he would have been perfect. It is only when the Skimpole philosopher wants other people's pounds that he becomes objectionable. Ah, how pleasantly life might glide by, taken à la Skimpole;—a beautiful waveless river, drifting imperceptibly on to darkness! But we make our own election. When we are wise enough to abjure all the glittering battle-grounds of man's ambition, we must needs fall in love, and go mad because a shallow-hearted woman has black eyes and a straight nose. With red hair and freckles Mrs. Gilbert might go to perdition, unwept and unhindered; but because the

false creature has a pretty face we want to tear her all to pieces for her treachery."

In that moonlight walk from Lowlands to Nessborough Hollow there was time enough for Mr. Lansdell to fall into many moods. At one time he was ready to laugh aloud, in bitter contempt for his own weakness; at another time, moved almost to tears by the contemplation of his ruined dreams. It was so difficult for him to separate the ideal Isabel of yesterday from the degraded creature of to-night. He believed what Charles Raymond had told him, but he could not realise it: the hard and cruel facts slipped away from him every now and then, and he found himself thinking of the Doctor's Wife with all the old tenderness. Then suddenly, like a glare of phosphoric light, the memory of her treachery would flash back upon him. Why should he lament the innocent idol of his dreams? There was not, there never had been, any such creature. But he could not hold this in his mind. He could not blot out of his brain the Isabel of the past. It was easier for him to think of her as he might

have thought of the dead, dwelling fondly on vain dreams of happiness which once might have been, but now could never be, because *she* was no more.

There was not a scheme that he had ever made for that impossible future which did not come back to his mind to-night. The places in which he had fancied himself lingering in tranquil happiness with the woman he loved arose before him in all their brightest colouring; fair lonely Alpine villages, whose very names he had forgotten, emerged from the dim mists of memory, bright as an eastern city rising out of night's swiftly-melting vapours into the clear light of morning; and he saw Isabel Gilbert leaning from a rustic balcony jutting out upon broad purple waters, screened and sheltered by the tall grandeur of innumerable snow-peaks. Ah, how often he had painted these things; the moonlit journeys on nights as calm as this, under still bluer skies lit by a larger moon; the varied ways and waters by which they might have gone, always leading them further and further away from the common world and the base thoughts of common people; the

perfect isolation in which there should have been no loneliness! And all this might have been, thought Mr. Lansdell, if she had not been so base and degraded a creature as to cling blindly to a vulgar lover, whose power over her most likely lay in some guilty secret of the past.

Twenty times in the course of that long summer-night's walk Roland Lansdell stopped for a minute or so, doubtful whether he should go further or not. What motive had he in seeking out this stranger staying at a rustic public-house? What right had he to interfere in a wicked woman's low intrigue? If Isabel Gilbert was the creature she was represented to be,—and he could not doubt his authority,—what could it matter to him how low she sank? Had she not coolly and deliberately rejected his love—his devotion, so earnestly and solemnly offered to her? Had she not left him to his despair and desolation, with no better comfort than the stereotyped promise that she would "think of him"? What was she to him, that he should trouble himself about her, and bring universal

scorn upon his name, perhaps, by some low tavern brawl? No; he would go no further; he would blot this creature out of his mind, and turn his back upon the land which held her. Was not all the world before him, and all creation designed for his pleasure? Was there any thing upon earth denied him, except the ignis-fatuus light of this woman's black eyes?

"Perhaps this is a turning-point in my life," he thought, during one of these pauses; "and there may be some chance for me after all. Why should I not have a career like other men, and try like them to be of some use to my species? Better, perhaps, to be always trying and always failing, than to stand aloof for ever, wasting my intellect upon vain calculations as to the relative merits of the game and the candle. An outsider cannot judge the merits of the strife. To a man of my temperament it may have seemed a small matter whether Spartans or Persians were victors in the pass of Thermopylæ; but what a glorious thing the heat and din of the struggle must have been for those who were in it! I begin to

think it is a mistake to lounge luxuriously on the grand-stand, looking down at the riders. Better, perhaps, wear a jockey's jacket; even to be thrown and trampled to death in the race. I will wash my hands of Mrs. George Gilbert, and go back to the Priory and sleep peacefully; and to-morrow morning I will ask Lady Gwendoline to be my wife; and then I can stand for Wareham, and go in for liberal-conservatism and steam-farming."

But the picture of Isabel Gilbert and the stranger meeting in Nessborough Hollow was not to be so easily erased from Mr. Lansdell's brain. The habit of vacillation, which had grown out of the idleness of his life, was stronger in him to-night than usual; but the desire to see for himself how deeply he was wronged triumphed over every other feeling, and he never turned his face from the direction in which Nessborough Hollow lay,—a little rustic nook in fertile Midlandshire, almost as beautiful, after its own simple English fashion, as those sublime Alpine villages which shone upon Roland Lansdell in his dreams. He came near the place at last; a little tired

by the long walk from Lowlands; a good deal wearied by all the contending emotions of the last few hours. He came upon the spot at last, not by the ordinary roadway, but across a strip of thickly-wooded waste land lying high above the hollow—a dense and verdant shelter, in which the fern grew tall beneath the tangled branches of the trees. Here he stopped, upon the topmost edge of a bank that sloped down into the rustic roadway. The place beneath him was a kind of glen, sheltered from all the outer world, solemnly tranquil in that silent hour. He saw the road winding and narrowing under the trees until it reached a little rustic bridge. He heard the low ripple of the distant brook; and close beside the bridge he saw the white wall of the little inn, chequered with broad black beams, and crowned by high peaked gables jutting out above quaint latticed casements. In one low window he saw a feeble candle gleaming behind a poor patch of crimson curtain, and through the half-open door a narrow stream of light shone in a slanting line upon the ground.

He saw all this; and then from the other end of the still glade he saw two figures coming slowly towards the inn. Two figures, one of which was so familiar and had been so dear that despair, complete and absolute, came upon him for the first time, in that one brief start of recognition. Ah, surely he had never believed in her falsehood until this moment; surely, if he had believed Charles Raymond, the agony of seeing her here could not have been so great as this!

He stood upon the crown of the steep slope, with his hands grasping the branches on each side of him, looking down at those two quiet figures advancing slowly in the moonlight. There was nothing between him and them except the grassy bank, broken here and there by patches of gorse and fern, and briers and saplings; there was nothing to intercept his view, and the moonlight shone full upon them. He did not look at the man. What did it matter to him what *he* was like? He looked at *her*—at her whom he had loved so tenderly—at her for whose sake he had consented to believe in woman's truth and

purity. He looked at her, and saw her face, very pale in the moonlight,—blanched, no doubt, by the guilty pallor of fear. Even the pattern of her dress was familiar to him. Had she not worn it in one of their meetings at Thurston's Crag?

"Fool!" he thought, "to think that she, who found it so easy a matter to deceive her husband, must needs be true to *me*. *I* was ill at ease and remorseful when I went to meet her; but *she* came to me smiling, and went away, placid and beautiful as a good angel, to tell her husband that she had been to Thurston's Crag, and had happened to meet Mr. Lansdell."

He stood as still as death, not betraying his presence by so much as the rustling of a leaf, while the two figures approached the spot above which he stood. But a little way off they paused, and were parting, very coolly, as it seemed, when Mrs. Gilbert lifted up her face, and said something to the man. He stood with his back turned towards Roland, to whom the very expression of Isabel's face was visible in the moonlight.

It seemed to him as if she was pleading for

something, for he had never seen her face more earnest,—no, not even when she had decided the question of his life's happiness in that farewell meeting beneath Thurston's oak. She seemed to be pleading for something, since the man nodded his head once or twice while she was speaking, with a churlish gesture of assent; and when they were about to part he bent his head and kissed her. There was an insolent indifference about his manner of doing this that stung Roland more keenly than any display of emotion could have done.

After this the Doctor's Wife went away. Roland watched her as she turned once, and stood for a moment looking back at the man from whom she had just parted, and then disappeared amongst the shadows in the glade. Ah; if she had been nothing more than a shadow—if he could have awakened to find all this the brief agony of a dream! The man stood where Isabel had left him, while he took a box of fusees from his waistcoat-pocket and lighted a cigar; but his back was still turned to Mr. Lansdell.

He drew two or three puffs of smoke from

the cigar, assured himself that it was fully lighted, and then strolled slowly towards the spot above which Roland stood.

All that was left of the original savage in the fine gentleman arose at that moment in Roland Lansdell's breast. He had come there, only to ascertain for himself that he had been betrayed and deluded; he had come with no vengeful purpose in his mind; or, at any rate, with no consciousness of any such purpose. He had come to be cool, indifferent, ironical; to slay with cruel and cutting words, perhaps, but to use no common weapons. But in a moment all his modern philosophy of indifference melted away, and left him with the original man's murderous instincts and burning sense of wrong raging fiercely in his breast.

He leapt down the sloping bank with scarcely any consciousness of touching the slippery grass; but he dragged the ferns and brambles from the loose earth in his descent, and a shower of torn verdure flew up into the summer air. He had no weapon, nothing but his right arm, wherewith to

strike the broad-chested black-bearded stranger. But he never paused to consider that, or to count the chances of a struggle. He only knew that he wanted to kill the man for whose sake Isabel Gilbert had rejected and betrayed him. In the next moment his hands were on the stranger's throat.

"You scoundrel!" he gasped hoarsely, "you consummate coward and scoundrel, to bring that woman to this place!"

There was a brief struggle, and then the stranger freed himself from Mr. Lansdell's grasp. There was no comparison between the physical strength and weight of the two men; and the inequality was sensibly increased by a stout walking-stick of the bludgeon order carried by the black-bearded stranger.

"Hoity, toity!" cried that gentleman, who seemed scarcely disposed to take Mr. Lansdell's attack seriously; "have you newly escaped from some local lunatic asylum, my friend, that you go about the country flying at people's throats in this fashion? What's the row? Can't a gentleman in the merchant navy take a moonlight stroll with

his daughter for once in a way, to wish her good-by before he fits out for a fresh voyage, without all this hullabaloo?"

"Your daughter!" cried Roland Lansdell. "Your daughter?"

"Yes, my daughter Isabel, wife of Mr. Gilbert, surgeon."

"Thank God!" murmured Roland slowly, "thank God!"

And then a pang of remorse shot through his heart, as he thought how little his boasted love had been worth, after all; how ready he had been to disbelieve in her purity; how easily he had accepted the idea of her degradation.

"I ought to have known," he thought,—"I ought to have known that she was innocent. If all the world had been banded together against her, I should have been her champion and defender. But my love was only a paltry passion after all. The gold changed to brass in the fire of the first ordeal."

He thought this, or something like this, and then in the next moment he said courteously:

"Upon my word, I have to apologise for my—" he hesitated a little here, for he really was ashamed of himself; all the murderous instincts were gone, as if they had never been, and the Englishman's painfully-acute perception of the ridiculous being fully aroused, he felt that he had made a consummate fool of himself. "I have to apologise for my very absurd behaviour just now; but having heard a very cruel and slanderous report, connecting you as a stranger, and not as a near relation, with Mrs. Gilbert, and entertaining a most sincere respect for that lady and her husband, to say nothing of the fact that I had been lately dining,"—Mr. Lansdell had not drunk so much as one glassful of wine during the last four-and-twenty hours; but he would have been quite willing to admit himself a drunkard, if that could have lessened the ridiculous element of his position,—"in point of fact I completely lost my head. I am very happy to think you are so nearly related to the lady I so much esteem; and if I can be of service to you in any manner, I—"

"Stop a bit," cried Mr. Sleaford the barrister,

—"stop a bit! I thought I knew your voice. *You're* the languid swell, who were so jolly knowing at the Old Bailey,—the languid swell who had nothing better to do than join the hunt against a poor devil that never cheated you out of sixpence. I said, if ever I came out of prison alive, *I'd kill you;* and I'll keep my promise."

He hissed out these last words between his set teeth. His big muscular hands were fastened on Roland Lansdell's throat; and his face was pushed forward until it almost touched that other handsome face which defied him in the proud insolence of a moral courage that rose above all physical superiority. The broad bright moonlight streaming through a wide gap in the foliage fell full upon the two men; and in the dark face glowering at his, Mr. Lansdell recognised the man whom he had followed down to Liverpool for the mere amusement of the chase,—the man described in the police records by a dozen aliases, and best known by his familiar sobriquet of "Jack the Scribe."

"You dog!" cried Mr. Sleaford, "I've dreamt

about such a meeting as this when I was working the pious dodge at Portland. I've dreamt about it; and it did me good to feel my fingers at your throat, even in my dreams. You dog! I'll do for you, if I swing for this night's work."

There was a struggle,—a brief and desperate struggle, in which the two men wrestled with each other, and the chances of victory seemed uncertain. Then Mr. Sleaford's bludgeon went whirling up into the air, and descended with a dull thud, once, twice, three times upon Roland Lansdell's bare head. After the third blow, Jack the Scribe loosed his grasp from the young man's throat, and the master of Mordred Priory fell crashing down among the fern and wild-flowers, with a shower of opal-tinted rose-petals fluttering about him as he fell.

He lay very quietly where he had fallen. Mr. Sleaford looked about him right and left along the pleasant moonlighted glade. There was not a living creature to be seen either way. The light behind the red curtain in the little rustic tavern still glimmered feebly in the distance; but the

stillness of the place could scarcely have seemed more profound had Nessborough Hollow been a hidden glade in some primeval forest.

Jack the Scribe knelt down beside the figure lying so quietly amongst the tangled verdure, and laid his strong bare hand very gently above Mr. Lansdell's waistcoat.

"He'll do," muttered the Scribe; "I've spoiled him for some time to come, any how. Perhaps it's all for the best if I haven't gone too far."

He rose from his knees, looked about him again, and assured himself of the perfect loneliness of the place. Then he walked slowly towards the little inn.

"A low blackguard would have taken the fellow's watch," he mused, "and got himself into trouble that way. What did he mean by flying at me about Isabel, I wonder; and how does he come to know her? He belongs to this part of the country, I suppose. And to think that I should have been so near him all this time without knowing it. I knew his name, and that's about all I did know; but I thought he was a London swell."

He pushed open the door of the little tavern presently—the door through which the slanting line of light had streamed out upon the pathway. All within was very quiet, for the rustic owners of the habitation had long since retired to their peaceful slumbers, leaving Mr. Sleaford what he called "the run of the house." They had grown very familiar with their lodger, and placed implicit confidence in him as a jolly outspoken fellow of the seafaring order; for these Midlandshire rustics were not very keen to detect any small shortcomings in Mr. Sleaford's assumption of the mercantile mariner.

He went into the room where the light was burning. It was the room which he had occupied during his residence at the Leicester Arms. He seated himself at the table, on which there were some writing materials, and scrawled a few lines to the effect that he found himself obliged to go away suddenly that night, on his way to Liverpool, and that he left a couple of sovereigns, at a rough guess, to pay his score. He wrapped the money up in the letter, sealed it with a great

sprawling red seal, directed it to the landlord, and placed it on a conspicuous corner of the mantelpiece. Then he took off his boots, and crept softly up the creaking corkscrew staircase leading to his bedroom, with the candle in his hand. He came down stairs again about ten minutes afterwards carrying a little valise, which he slung across his shoulder by a strap; then he took up his bludgeon and prepared to depart.

But before leaving the room he bent over the table, and examined the heaviest end of his stick by the light of the candle. There was blood upon it, and a little tuft of dark hair, which he burned in the flame of the candle; and when he looked at his waistcoat he saw that there were splashes of blood on that and on his shirt.

He held the end of the stick over the candle till it was all smoked and charred; he buttoned his cut-away coat over his chest, and then took a railway-rug from a chair in a corner and threw it across his shoulder.

"It's an ugly sight to look at, that is," he muttered; "but I don't think I went too far."

He went out at the little door, and into the glade, where a nightingale was singing high up amongst the clustering foliage, and where the air was filled with the faint perfume of honeysuckle and starry wild roses. Once he looked with something like terror in his face, towards the spot where he had left his prostrate enemy; and then he turned and walked away at a rapid pace, in the other direction, crossing the rustic wooden bridge, and ascending the rising ground that led towards the Briargate Road.

CHAPTER IX.

RETROSPECTIVE.

The parish surgeon lay in his darkened bed-chamber at Graybridge day after day and night after night, and Mr. Pawlkatt, coming twice a day to look at him, could give very small comfort to the watchers. George Gilbert had been ill nearly a fortnight—not quite a fortnight—but it seemed now a common thing for the house to be hushed and darkened, and the once active master lying dull, heavy, and lethargic, under the shadow of the dimity bed-curtains. Those who watched him lost all count of time. It seemed almost as if the surgeon had always been ill. It was difficult, somehow, to remember that not quite two weeks ago he had been one of the most active inhabitants of Graybridge; it was still more difficult to imagine that he could ever again be what he had been.

No patient, in the dull anguish of an obstinate

fever, could have desired better or more devoted nurses than those who waited on George Gilbert. To Isabel this experience of a sick-room was altogether a new thing. She had known her father to be laid up for the space of a day with a vague sort of ailment which he called "bile," but which generally arose after a dinner in London with certain choice spirits of his acquaintance, and a stealthy return to the sanctuary of his Camberwell home in the chill gray glimmer of early morning. She had known her step-mother to complain perpetually of divers aches, and pains, and "stitches," and stiffnesses of her ribs and shoulder-blades and loins, and other complicated portions of her bony structure, and to throw out dismal prophecies to the effect that she would be worried into a premature grave by the breakage and waste of boys, and the general aggravation of a large family. But illness, a real and dangerous malady, with all its solemn accompaniments of hushed voices and darkness, and grave faces and stealthy footsteps, was quite new to the Doctor's Wife.

If she had loved her sick husband with that

romantic love which it had been her sin and her misfortune to bestow elsewhere, she could not have watched quietly in that darkened chamber. She would have fled away from the patient's presence to fling herself on the ground somewhere, wholly abandoned to her anguish. But she had never loved George Gilbert: only that womanly tenderness, which was the chief attribute of her nature, that sympathetic affection for every thing that was suffering or sorrowful, held her to the invalid's bedside. She was so sorry for him, and she was so horribly afraid that he would die. The thought that she might step across the darksome chasm of his grave into those fair regions inhabited by Roland Lansdell, could not hold a place in her heart. Death, the terrible and the unfamiliar, stood a black and gaunt figure between her and all beyond the sick-room. Edith Dombey and Ernest Maltravers were alike forgotten during those long days and nights in which the surgeon's rambling delirious talk only broke the silence. Isabel Gilbert's ever-active imagination was busy with more terrible images than any to be found in her books. The pictures of

a funeral cortège in the dusty lane, a yawning grave in the familiar churchyard, forced themselves upon her as she sat watching the black shadow of the perforated lantern that held the rush-light, looming gigantic on the whitewashed wall.

And, thinking thus of that dark hour which might lie before her, she thought much less of Roland Lansdell than in the days before her husband's illness. She was not a wicked woman; she was only very foolish. The thought that there was a handsome young country gentleman with a fine estate and fifteen thousand a-year waiting to be her second husband, if death loosened her present bondage, could not have a place amongst those tender poetical dreams engendered out of her books. A woman of the world, hardened by worldly experience, might have sat in that dusky chamber watching the sick man, and brooding, half remorsefully, half impatiently, upon the thought of what might happen if his malady should have a fatal ending. But this poor sentimental girl, nourished upon the airiest fancies of poets and romancers, had no such loathsome thoughts. Roland Lansdell's wealth and position

had never tempted her; it had only dazzled her; it had only seemed a bright and splendid atmosphere radiating from and belonging to the Deity himself. If, in some dreamy rapture, she had ever fancied herself far away from all the common world, united to the man she loved, she had only pictured herself as a perpetual worshipper in white muslin, kneeling at the feet of her idol, with wild-flowers in her hair. The thought that he had fifteen thousand a-year, and a superb estate, never disturbed by its gross influence her brighter dreams; it was not in her to be mercenary, or even ambitious. That yearning for splendour and glitter which had made her envious of Edith Dombey's fate was only a part of her vague longing for the beautiful; she wanted to be amongst beautiful things, made beautiful herself by their influence; but whether their splendour took the form of a boudoir in May Fair all a-glow with wonderful pictures and Parian statues, rare old china and tapestry hangings, or the floral luxuriance of a forest on the banks of the Amazon, was of very little consequence to this sentimental

young dreamer. If she could not be Mrs. Dombey, sublime in scornful indignation and ruby silk velvet, she would have been contented to be simple Dorothea, washing her tired feet in the brook, with her hair about her shoulders. She only wanted the vague poetry of life, the mystic beauty of romance infused somehow into her existence; and she was as yet too young to understand that latent element of poetry which underlies the commonest life.

In the mean time a very terrible trouble had come to her—the trouble occasioned by her father's presence in the neighbourhood of Graybridge. Never, until some days after his apprehension at Liverpool, had Mr. Sleaford's wife and children known the nature of the profession by which the master of the house earned a fluctuating income,—enough for reckless extravagance sometimes, at others, barely enough to keep the wolf from the door. This is *not* a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth. Jack the Scribe's children were as innocently ignorant of their father's calling as if that gentleman had been indeed what he represented himself—a bar-

rister. He went every day to his professional duties, and returned at night to his domestic hearth; he was a very tolerable father; a faithful, and not unkind husband; a genial companion amongst the sort of men with whom he associated. He had only that awkward little habit of forging other people's names; by which talent, exercised in conjunction with a gang whose cunningly-organised plan of operations won for them considerable celebrity, he had managed to bring up a numerous family in comparative comfort and respectability. If any one had been good enough to die and leave Mr. Sleaford a thousand a-year, Jack the Scribe would have willingly laid down his pen and retired into respectability; but in the mean time he found it necessary to provide for himself and a hungry family; and having no choice between a clerk's place with a pound a week and the vaguely-glorious chances of a modern freebooter, he had joined the gang in question, to whom he was originally made known by some very pretty little amateur performances in the accommodation-bill line.

Never, until after his apprehension, had the truth been revealed to any one member of that Camberwell household. Long ago, when Jack the Scribe was a dashing young articled clerk, with bold black eyes and a handsome face,—long ago, when Isabel was only a baby, the knowledge of a bill-discounting transaction which the clerk designated an awkward scrape, but which his employers declared to be a felony, had come suddenly upon Mr. Sleaford's first wife, and had broken her heart. But when the amateur artist developed into the accomplished professional, Isabel's father learned the art of concealing the art. His sudden departure from Camberwell, the huddling of the family into an Islington lodging, and his subsequent flight to Liverpool, were explained to his household as an attempt to escape an arrest for debt; and as angry creditors and sheriffs' officers had been but common intruders upon the peace of the household, there seemed nothing very unnatural in such a flight. It was only when Mr. Sleaford was securely lodged within the fatal walls of Newgate, when the preliminary investigations

of the great forgeries were published in every newspaper, that he communicated the real state of the case to his horror-stricken wife and children.

There is little need to dwell upon the details of that most bitter time. People get over these sort of things somehow; and grief and shame are very rarely fatal, even to the most sensitive natures. "Alas, sweet friend," says Shelley's Helen, "you must believe this heart is stone; it did not break!" There seems to be a good deal of the stony element in all our hearts, so seldom are the arrows of affliction fatal. To Isabel the horror of being a forger's daughter was something very terrible; but even in its terror there was just the faintest flavour of romance: and if she could have smuggled her father out of Newgate in a woman's cap and gown, like Lady Nithisdale, she might have forgiven him the crimes that had helped to make her a heroine. The boys, after the first shock of the revelation, took a very lenient view of their father's case, and were inclined to attribute his shortcomings to the tyranny and prejudice of society.

"If a rich cove has a jolly lot of money in the bank, and poor coves are starving, the rich cove must expect to have it forged away from him," Horace Sleaford remarked moodily, when debating the question of his father's guilt. Nor did the hobbledehoy's sympathy end here; for he borrowed a dirty and dilapidated copy of Mr. Ainsworth's delightful romance from a circulating-library, and minutely studied that gentleman's description of Newgate in the days of Jack Sheppard, with a view to Mr. Sleaford's evasion of his gaolers.

It was not so very bad to bear after all; for of course Jack the Scribe was not so imprudent as to make any admission of his guilt. He represented himself as the victim of circumstances, the innocent associate of wicked men, entrapped into the folly of signing other people's names by a conspiracy on the part of his companions. Hardened as he was by the experiences of a long and doubtful career, he felt some natural shame; and he did all in his power to keep his wife and children dissociated from himself and his crimes. Bit-

terly though the cynic may bewail the time-serving and mercenary nature of his race, a man can generally find some one to help him in the supreme crises of his fate. Mr. Sleaford found friends, obscure and vulgar people, by whose assistance he was enabled to get his family out of the way before his trial came on at the Old Bailey. The boys, ever athirst for information of the Jack-Sheppard order, perused the daily record of that Old Bailey ordeal by stealth in the attic where they slept; but Isabel saw nothing of the newspapers, which set forth the story of her father's guilt, and only knew at the last, when all was decided, what Mr. Sleaford's fate was to be. Thus it was that she never saw Mr. Lansdell's name amongst those of the witnesses against her father; and even if she had seen that name, it is doubtful whether it would have lived in her memory until the day when she met the master of Mordred Priory.

No language can describe the horror that she felt on her father's sudden appearance in Midlandshire. Utterly ignorant of the practices of prison-

life, and the privileges of a ticket-of-leave, she had regarded Mr. Sleaford's dismal habitation as a kind of tomb in which he was to be buried alive for the full term of his imprisonment. Vaguely and afar off she saw the shadow of danger to Roland, in the ultimate release of his enemy; but the shadow seemed so very far away, that after the first shock of Mr. Lansdell's story, it had almost faded from her mind, blotted out by nearer joys and sorrows. It was only when her father stood before her, fierce and exacting, hardened and brutalised by prison-life, a wretch for ever at war with the laws he had outraged,—it was only then that the full measure of Roland Lansdell's danger was revealed to her.

"If ever I come out of prison alive, I will kill you!"

Never had she forgotten the words of that threat. But she might hope that it was only an empty threat, the harmless thunder of a moment's passion; not a deliberate promise, to be fulfilled whenever the chance of its fulfilment arose. She did hope this; and in her first stolen interview

with her father, she led him to talk of his trial, and contrived to ascertain his present sentiments regarding the man who had so materially helped to convict him. The dusky shadows of the summer evening hid the pallor of her earnest face, as she walked by Mr. Sleaford's side in the sheltered hollow; and that gentleman was too much absorbed by the sense of his own wrongs to be very observant of his daughter's agitation.

Isabel Gilbert heard enough during that interview to convince her that Roland Lansdell's danger was very real and near. Mr. Sleaford's vengeful passions had fed and battened upon the solitude of the past years. Every privation and hardship endured in his prison-life had been a fresh item in his long indictment against Mr. Lansdell, the "languid swell," whom he had never wronged to the extent of a halfpenny, but who, for the mere amusement of the chase, had hunted him down. This was what he could not forgive. He *could not* recognise the right of an amateur detective, who bore witness against a criminal for the general benefit of society.

After this first meeting in Nessborough Hollow, the Doctor's Wife had but one thought, one purpose and desire; and that was, to keep her father in ignorance of his enemy's near neighbourhood, and to get him away before mischief arose between the two men. But this was not such an easy matter. Mr. Sleaford refused to leave his quarters at the Leicester Arms until he obtained that which he had come to Midlandshire to seek—money enough for a new start in life. He had made his way to Jersey immediately after getting his release, and had there seen his wife and the boys. From them he heard of Isabel's marriage. She had married well, they said: a doctor at a place called Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne—an important man, no doubt; and she had not been unkind to them upon the whole, writing nice long letters to her stepmother now and then, and sending post-office orders for occasional sovereigns.

Heaven only knows with what difficulty the poor girl had contrived to save those occasional sovereigns. Mr. Sleaford demanded money of his

daughter. He had made all manner of inquiries about George Gilbert's position, and had received very satisfactory answers to those inquiries. The young doctor was a "warm" man, the gossips in the little parlour at the Leicester Arms told Jack the Scribe; a prudent young man, who had inherited a nice little nest-egg—perpetually being hatched at a moderate rate of interest in the Wareham bank—from his father, and had saved money himself, no doubt. And then the gossips entered into calculations as to the value of Mr. Gilbert's practice, and the simple economy of his domestic arrangements; all favourable to the idea that the young surgeon had a few thousands snugly invested in the county bank.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Sleaford considered himself entirely justified in standing out for what he called his rights, namely, a sum of money—say fifty or a hundred pounds—from his daughter; and Isabel, with the thought of Roland's danger perpetually in her mind, felt that the money must be obtained at any price. Had her husband been well enough to talk of business-

matters, she might have made her appeal to him; but as it was, there was an easier and more speedy method of getting the money. Roland, Roland himself, who was rich, and to whom fifty pounds, —large as the sum seemed to this girl, who had never had an unbroken ten-pound note in her life, —must be a very small matter; he was the only person who could give her immediate help. It was to him therefore she appealed. Ah, with what bitter shame and anguish! And it was to deliver up the money thus obtained that she met her father in Nessborough Hollow on the night of that dismal dinner at Lowlands. The idea of telling Roland of his danger never for a moment entered her mind. Was he not a hero, and would he not inevitably have courted that or any other peril?

She thought of his position with all a weak woman's illogical terror; and the only course that presented itself to her mind was that which she pursued. She wanted to get her father away before any chance allusion upon a stranger's lips told him that the man he so bitterly hated was within his reach.

CHAPTER X.

"'TWERE BEST AT ONCE TO SINK TO PEACE."

After that farewell meeting with Mr. Sleaford in Nessborough Hollow, a sense of peace came upon Isabel Gilbert. She had questioned her father about his plans, and he had told her that he should leave Midlandshire by the seven o'clock train from Wareham on the following morning. He should be heartily rejoiced to get to London, he said, and to leave a place where he felt like a fox in a hole. The sentimental element was by no means powerfully developed in the nature of Jack the Scribe, to whom the crowded pavements of Fleet Street and the Strand were infinitely more agreeable than the wild roses and branching fern of Midlandshire.

His daughter slept tranquilly that night for the first time after Mr. Sleaford's appearance before the surgeon's door. She slept in peace,

worn out by the fatigue and anxiety of the last fortnight; and no evil dream disturbed her slumbers. The odic forces must be worth very little after all, for there was no consciousness in the sleeper's mind of that quiet figure lying among the broken fern; no shadow, however dim, of the scene that had been enacted in the tranquil summer moonlight, while she was hurrying homeward through the dewy lanes, triumphant in the thought that her difficult task was accomplished. Only once in a century does the vision of Maria Martin appear to an anxious dreamer; only so often as to shake the formal boundary-wall of common sense which we have so rigidly erected between the visible and invisible, and to show us that there *are* more things in heaven and earth than our dull philosophy is prepared to recognise.

Isabel woke upon the morning after that interview in the Hollow, with a feeling of relief still in her mind. Her father was gone, and all was well. He was not likely to return; for she had told him, with most solemn protestations, that she had obtained the money with extreme diffi-

culty, and would never be able to obtain more. She had told him this, and he had promised never again to assail her with any demands. It was a very easy thing for Jack the Scribe to make that or any other promise; but even if he broke his word, Isabel thought, there was every chance that Roland Lansdell would leave Midlandshire very speedily, and become once more an alien and a wanderer.

The Doctor's Wife was at peace, therefore; the dreadful terror of the past fortnight was lifted away from her mind, and she was prepared to do her duty; to be true to Mr. Colborne's solemn teaching, and to watch dutifully, undistracted by any secret fear and anguish, by George Gilbert's sick-bed.

Very dismal faces greeted her beside that bed. Mr. Jeffson never left his post now at the pillow of his young master. The weeds grew unheeded in the garden; and Brown Molly missed her customary grooming. The gardener had thrown half a load of straw in the lane, below the doctor's window, so that no rumbling of the wagon-wheels carrying home the new-mown hay should

disturb George Gilbert's feverish sleep, if the brief fitful dozes into which he fell now and then could be called by so sweet a name.

Mr. Pawlkatt sat looking at his patient longer than usual that morning. George Gilbert lay in a kind of stupor, and did not recognise his medical attendant, and sometime rival. He had long since ceased to be anxious about his poor patients in the lanes behind the church, or about any thing else upon this earth, as it seemed; and now that her great terror had been lifted from her mind, Isabel saw a new and formless horror gliding swiftly towards her, like a great iceberg sailing fast upon an arctic sea. She followed Mr. Pawlkatt out of the room, and down the little staircase, and clung to his arm as he was about to leave her.

"Oh, do you think he will die?" she said. "I did not know until this morning that he was so very ill. Do you think he will die?"

The surgeon looked inquisitively into the earnest face lifted to his—looked with some expression of surprise upon his countenance.

"I am very anxious, Mrs. Gilbert," he answered gravely. "I will not conceal from you that I am growing very anxious. The pulse is feeble and intermittent; and these low fevers—there, there, don't cry. I'll drive over to Wareham, as soon as I've seen the most important of my cases; and I'll ask Dr. Herstlett to come and look at your husband. Pray try to be calm."

"I am so frightened," murmured Isabel, between her low half-stifled sobs. "I never saw any one ill—like that—before."

Mr. Pawlkatt watched her gravely as he drew on his gloves.

"I am not sorry to see this anxiety on your part, Mrs. Gilbert," he remarked sententiously. "As the friend and brother-professional of your husband, and as a man who is—ahem!—old enough to be your father, I will go so far as to say that I am gratified to find that you—I may say, your heart is in the right place. There have been some very awkward reports about you, Mrs. Gilbert, during the last few days. I—I—of course should not presume to allude to

those reports, if I did not believe them to be erroneous," the surgeon added, rather hastily, not feeling exactly secure as to the extent and bearing of the law of libel.

But Isabel only looked at him with bewilderment and distress in her face.

"Reports about me!" she repeated. "What reports?"

"There has been a person—a stranger—staying at a little inn down in Nessborough Hollow; and you,—in fact, I really have no right to interfere in this matter, but my very great respect for your husband,—and, in short——"

"Oh, that person is gone now," Isabel answered frankly. "It was very unkind of people to say any thing against him, or against me. He was a relation,—a very near relation,—and I could not do otherwise than see him now and then while he was in the neighbourhood. I went late in the evening, because I did not wish to leave my husband at any other time. I did not think that the Graybridge people watched me so closely, or were so ready to think that what I do must be wrong."

Mr. Pawlkatt patted her hand soothingly.

"A relation, my dear Mrs. Gilbert?" he exclaimed. "That, of course, quite alters the case. I always said that you were no doubt perfectly justified in doing as you did; though it would have been better to invite the person here. Country people will talk, you know. As a medical man, with rather a large field of experience, I see all these little provincial weaknesses. They will talk; but keep up your courage, Mrs. Gilbert. We shall do our best for our poor friend. We shall do our very best."

He gave Isabel's tremulous hand a little reassuring squeeze, and departed complacently.

The Doctor's Wife stood absently watching him as he walked away, and then turned and went slowly into the parlour — the empty, miserable-looking parlour, which had not been used now for more than a week. The dust lay thick upon the shabby old furniture, and the atmosphere was hot and oppressive.

Here Isabel sat down beside the chiffonier, where her poor little collection of books was

huddled untidily in a dusty corner. She sat down to think—trying to realise the nature of that terror which seemed so close to her, trying to understand the full significance of what Mr. Pawlkatt had said of her husband.

The surgeon had given no hope that George Gilbert would recover; he had only made little conventional speeches about calmness and fortitude.

She tried to think, but could not. She had only spoken the truth just now, when she cried out that she was frightened. This kind of terror was so utterly new to her that she could not understand the calm business-like aspect of the people who watched and waited on her husband. Could he be dying? That strong active man, whose rude health and hearty appetite had once jarred so harshly upon all her schoolgirl notions of consumptive and blood-vessel-breaking heroes! Could he be dying?—dying as heroic a death as any she had ever read of in her novels: the death of a man who speculates his life for the benefit of his fellow-creatures, and loses by the venture. The memory of every wrong that she had ever done him—small

wrongs of neglect, or contemptuous opinions regarding his merits—wrongs that had been quite impalpable to the honest unromantic doctor,—crowded upon her now, and made a dull remorseful anguish in her breast. The dark shadow brooding over George Gilbert—the dread gigantic shadow, growing darker day by day—made him a new creature in the mind of this weak girl. No thought of her own position had any place in her mind. She could not think; she could only wait, oppressed by a dread whose nature she dared not realise. She sat for a long time in the same forlornly listless attitude, almost as helpless as the man who lay in the darkened chamber above her. Then, rousing herself with an effort, she crept upstairs to the room where the grave faces of the watchers greeted her, with very little sympathy in their gaze.

Had not Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson heard the reports current in Graybridge; and was it likely they could have any pity for a woman who crept stealthily at nightfall from her invalid husband's house to meet a stranger?

Isabel would have whispered some anxious question about the patient; but Matilda Jeffson frowned sternly at her, commanding silence with an imperious forefinger; and she was fain to creep into a dark corner, where it had been her habit to sit since the Jeffsons had, in a manner, taken possession of her husband's sick-bed. She could not dispute their right to do so. What was she but a frivolous, helpless creature, fluttering and trembling like a leaf when she essayed to do any little service for the invalid?

The day seemed painfully long. The ticking of an old clock on the stairs, and the heavy troubled breathing of the sick man, were the only sounds that broke the painful silence of the house. Once or twice Isabel took an open Testament from a little table near her, and tried to take some comfort from its pages. But she could not feel the beauty of the words as she had in the little church at Hurstonleigh, when her mind had been exalted by all manner of vague spiritualistic yearnings; now it seemed deadened by the sense of dread and horror. She did not love her husband; and those

tidings of heavenly love which have so subtle an affinity with earthly affection could not touch her very nearly in her present frame of mind. She did not love her husband well enough to pray that something little short of a miracle might be wrought for his sake. She was only sorry for him; tenderly compassionate of his suffering; very fearful that he might die. She did pray for him; but there was no exaltation in her prayers, and she had a dull presentiment that her supplications would not be answered.

It was late in the afternoon when the physician from Wareham came with Mr. Pawlkatt; and when he did arrive, he seemed to do very little, Isabel thought. He was a gray-whiskered important-looking man, with creaking boots; he seated himself by the bedside, and felt the patient's pulse, and listened to his breathing, and lifted his heavy eyelids, and peered into his dim blood-shot eyes. He asked a good many questions, and then went downstairs with Mr. Pawlkatt, and the two medical men were closeted together some ten or twelve minutes in the little parlour.

Isabel did not follow Mr. Pawlkatt downstairs this time. She was awed by the presence of the strange physician, and there was nothing in the manner of the two men that inspired hope or comfort. She sat quite still in her dusky corner; but Mrs. Jeffson stole out of the room soon after the medical men had quitted it, and went slowly downstairs. George was asleep; in a very sound and heavy sleep this time; and his breathing was more regular than it had been—more regular, but still a laboured stertorous kind of respiration that was very painful to hear.

In less than ten minutes Mrs. Jeffson came back, looking very pale, and with traces of tears upon her face. The good woman had been listening to the medical consultation in the little parlour below.

Perhaps Isabel dimly comprehended this; for she got up from her chair, and went a little way towards her husband's housekeeper.

"Oh, tell me the truth," she whispered imploringly; "do they think that he will die?"

"Yes," Matilda Jeffson answered, in a hard

cruel voice, strangely at variance with her stifled sobs, "yes, Mrs. Gilbert; and you'll be free to take your pleasure, and to meet Mr. Lansdell as often as you like; and go gadding about after dark with strange men. You might have waited a bit, Mrs. Gilbert; you wouldn't have had to wait very long—for they say my poor dear master—and I had him in my arms the day he was born, so I've need to love him dearly, even if others haven't!—I heard the doctor from Wareham tell Mr. Pawlkatt that he'll never live to see to-morrow morning's light. So you might have waited, Mrs. Gilbert; but you're a wicked woman and a wicked wife!"

But just at this moment the sick man started suddenly from his sleep, and lifted himself into a sitting position. Mr. Jeffson's arm was about him directly, supporting the wasted figure that had very lately been so strong.

George Gilbert had heard Matilda's last words, for he repeated them in a thick strange voice, but with sufficient distinctness. It was a surprise to those who nursed him to hear him speak reason-

ably, for it was some time since he had been conscious of passing events.

"Wicked! no, no!" he said. "Always a good wife; always a very good wife! Come, Izzie; come here. I'm afraid it has been a dull life, my dear," he said very gently, as she came to him, clinging to him, and looking at him with a white scared face,—"dull—very dull; but it wouldn't have been always so. I thought—by and by to—new practice—Helmswell—market-town—seven thousand inhabitants—and you—drive—pony-carriage, like Laura Pawlkatt—but—the Lord's will be done, my dear!—I hope I've done my duty—the poor people—better rooms—ventilation—please God, by and by. I've seen a great deal of suffering—and—my duty—"

He slid heavily back upon William Jeffson's supporting arm; and a rain of tears—passionate remorseful tears never to be felt by him—fell on his pallid face. His death was very sudden, though his illness had been, considering the nature of his disease, a long and tedious one. He died supremely peaceful in the consciousness of having

done his duty. He died, with Isabel's hand clasped in his own; and never, throughout his simple life, had one pang of doubt or jealousy tortured his breast.

CHAPTER XI.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS.

A SOLEMN calm came down upon the house at Graybridge, and for the first time Isabel Gilbert felt the presence of death about and around her, shutting out all the living world by its freezing influence. The great iceberg had come down upon the poor frail barque. It almost seemed to Isabel as if she and all in that quiet habitation had been encompassed by a frozen wall, through which the living could not penetrate.

She suffered very much; the morbid sensibility of her nature made her especially liable to such suffering. A dull remorseful pain gnawed at her heart. Ah, how wicked she had been! how false, how cruel, how ungrateful! But if she had known that he was to die—if she had only known—it might all have been different. The foreknowledge of his doom would have insured her truth

and tenderness; she could not have wronged, even by so much as a thought, a husband whose days were numbered. And amid all her remorse she was for ever labouring with the one grand difficulty—the difficulty of realising what had happened. She had needed the doctor's solemn assurance that her husband was really dead before she could bring herself to believe that the white swoon, the chill heaviness of the passive hand, did indeed mean death. And even when she had been told that all was over, the words seemed to have very little influence upon her mind. It could not be! All the last fortnight of anxiety and trouble was blotted out, and she could only think of George Gilbert as she had always known him until that time, in the full vigour of health and strength.

She was very sorrowful; but no passionate grief stirred her frozen breast. It was the shock, the sense of horror that oppressed her, rather than any consciousness of a great loss. She would have called her husband back to life; but chiefly because it was so horrible to her to know that he was there—near her—what he was. Once the

thought came to her—the weak selfish thought—that it would have been much easier for her to bear this calamity if her husband had gone away, far away from her, and only a letter had come to tell her that he was dead. She fancied herself receiving the letter, and wondering at its black-edged border. The shock would have been very dreadful; but not so horrible as the knowledge that George Gilbert was in that house, and yet there was no George Gilbert. Again and again her mind went over the same beaten track; again and again the full realisation of what had happened slipped away from her, and she found herself framing little speeches—penitent, remorseful speeches—expressive of her contrition for all past shortcomings. And then there suddenly flashed back upon her the too vivid picture of that deathbed scene, and she heard the dull thick voice murmuring feebly words of love and praise.

In all this time Roland Lansdell's image was shut out of her mind. In the dense and terrible shadow that filled all the chambers of her brain, that bright and splendid figure could have no

place. She thought of Mr. Colborne at Hurstonleigh now and then, and felt a vague yearning for his presence. He might have been able to comfort her perhaps, somehow; he might have made it easier for her to bear the knowledge of that dreadful presence in the room upstairs. She tried once or twice to read some of the chapters that had seemed so beautiful on the lips of the popular curate: but even out of that holy volume dark and ghastly images arose to terrify her, and she saw Lazarus emerging from the tomb livid in his grave-clothes: and death and horror seemed to be every where and in every thing.

After the first burst of passionate grief, bitterly intermingled with indignation against the woman whom she believed to have been a wicked and neglectful wife, Matilda Jeffson was not ungentle to the terror-stricken girl so newly made a widow. She took a cup of scalding tea into the darkened parlour where Isabel sat, shivering every now and then as if with cold, and persuaded the poor frightened creature to take a little of that comforting beverage. She wiped away her own tears with

her apron while she talked to Isabel of patience and resignation, submission to the will of Providence, and all those comforting theories which are very sweet to the faithful mourner, even when the night-time of affliction is darkest.

But Isabel was not yet a religious woman; the faith that is stronger than death was not hers in this hour of terror; she was only trying to be good—only trying, after her own simple, half-childish fashion, to resemble those holy and happy creatures whose pure lives she had heard Mr. Colborne describe, dwelling with tender, rapturous earnestness upon the perfection of their existence here, the splendour of their reward hereafter. She was only trying to be good; and the new current of her life had been disturbed by George Gilbert's death, as by a sudden tempest. She was a child again, weak and frivolous, frightened by the awful visitant who had so newly entered that house. All through the evening of her husband's death she sat in the little parlour, sometimes trying to read a little, sometimes idly staring at the tall wick of the tallow-candle, which was only snuffed once

in a way—when Mrs. Jeffson came into the room "to keep the scared creature company for a bit," she said to her husband, who sat by the kitchen-fire with his elbows on his knees and his face hidden in his hands, brooding over those bygone days when he had been wont to fetch the dead man from that commercial academy in the Wareham road.

There was a good deal of going in and out, a perpetual tramp of hushed footsteps moving to and fro, as it seemed to Isabel; and Mrs. Jeffson, even in the midst of her grief, appeared full of some kind of business that kept her astir all the evening. The Doctor's Wife had imagined that all voice and motion must come to an end—that life itself must make a pause—in a house where death was. Others might feel a far keener grief for the man that was gone; but no one felt so deep an awe of death as she did. Mrs. Jeffson brought her some supper on a little tray late in the evening; but she pushed it away from her and burst into tears. There seemed a kind of sacrilege in this carrying in and out of food and drink while he lay upstairs; he, whose hat still hung in the passage without, whose

papers and ink-bottles and medical books were all primly arranged on one of the little vulgar cupboards by the fireplace. Ah, how often she had hated those medical books for being what they were, instead of editions of *Zanoni* and *Ernest Maltravers!* and it seemed wicked even to have thought unkindly of them, now that he to whom they belonged was dead.

It was quite in vain that Mrs. Jeffson urged her to go upstairs to the room opposite that in which the surgeon lay; it was quite as vainly that the good woman entreated her to go and look at him, now that he was lying so peacefully in the newly arranged chamber, to lay her hand on his marble forehead, so that no shadow of him should trouble her in her sleep. The girl only shook her head forlornly.

"I'm afraid," she said, piteously — "I'm afraid of that room. I never thought that he would die. I know that I wasn't good. It was wicked to think of other people always, and not of him; but I never thought that he would die. I knew that he was good to me; and I tried to obey

him: but I think I should have been different if I had known that he would die."

She pulled out the little table-drawer where the worsted socks were rolled-up in fluffy balls, with needles sticking out of them here and there. Even these were a kind of evidence of her neglect. She had cobbled them a little during the later period of her married life,—during the time of her endeavour to be good,—but she had not finished this work or any other. Ah, what a poor creature she was, after all!—a creature of feeble resolutions, formed only to be broken; a weak vacillating creature, full of misty yearnings and aspirings—resolving nobly in one moment, to yield sinfully in the next.

She begged to be allowed to spend the night downstairs on the rickety little sofa; and Mrs. Jeffson, seeing that she was really oppressed by some childish terror of that upper-story, brought her some blankets and pillows, and a feeble little light that was to burn until daybreak.

So in that familiar room, whose every scrap of shabby furniture had been a part of the monotony

of her life, Isabel Gilbert spent the first night of her widowhood, lying on the little sofa, nervously conscious of every sound in the house; feverishly wakeful until long after the morning sun was shining through the yellow-white blind, when she fell into an uneasy doze, in which she dreamt that her husband was alive and well. She did not arouse herself out of this, and yet she was never thoroughly asleep throughout the time, until after ten o'clock; and then she found Mrs. Jeffson sitting near the little table, on which the inevitable cup of tea was smoking beside a plate of the clumsy kind of bread-and-butter inseparably identified with George Gilbert in Isabel's mind.

"There's somebody wants to see you, if you're well enough to be spoken to, my dear," Matilda said, very gently; for she had been considerably moved by Mrs. Gilbert's penitent little confession of her shortcomings as a wife; and was inclined to think that perhaps, after all, Graybridge had judged this helpless school-girl creature rather harshly. "Take the tea, my dear; I made it strong on purpose for you; and try and cheer up

a bit, poor lassie; you're young to wear widow's weeds; but he was fit to go. If all of us had worked as hard for the good of other folks, we could afford to die as peaceful as he did."

Isabel pushed the heavy tangled hair away from her pallid face, and pursed-up her pale lips to kiss the Yorkshirewoman.

"You're very kind to me," she said; "you used to think that I was wicked, I know; and then you seemed very unkind. But I always wished to be good. I should like to have been good, and to die young, like George's mother."

It is to be observed that, with Isabel's ideal of goodness there was always the association of early death. She had a vague idea that very religious and self-denying people got through their quota of piety with tolerable speed, and received their appointed reward. As yet her notions of self-sacrifice were very limited; and she could scarcely have conceived a long career of perfection. She thought of nuns as creatures who bade farewell to the world, and had all their back-hair cut off, and retired into a convent, and died soon afterwards,

while they were still young and interesting. She could not have imagined an elderly nun, with all a long monotonous life of self-abnegation behind her, getting up at four o'clock every morning, and being as bright and vivacious and cheerful as any happy wife or mother outside the convent-walls. Yet there are such people.

Mrs. Gilbert took a little of the hot tea, and then sat quite still, with her head lying on Matilda Jeffson's shoulder, and her hand clasped in Matilda's rough fingers. That living clasp seemed to impart a kind of comfort, so terribly had death entered into Isabel's narrow world.

"Do you think you shall be well enough to see him presently, poor lassie?" Mrs. Jeffson said, after a long silence. "I shouldn't ask you; only he seems anxious-like, as if there was something particular on his mind; and I know he's been very kind to you."

Isabel stared at her in bewilderment.

"I don't know who you're talking of," she said.

"It's Mr. Raymond from Conventford. It's early for him to be so far as Graybridge; but he looks as pale and worn-like as if he'd been up and about all night. He was all struck of a heap-like when I told him about our poor master."

Here Mrs. Jeffson had recourse to the cotton-apron which had been so frequently applied to her eyes during the last week. Isabel huddled a shabby little shawl about her shoulders; she had made no change in her dress when she had lain down the night before; and she was very pale and wan, and tumbled and woebegone, in the bright summer light.

"Mr. Raymond! Mr. Raymond!" She repeated his name to herself once or twice, and made a faint effort to understand why he should have come to her. He had always been very kind to her, and associated with his image there was a sense of sound wisdom and vigorous cheerfulness of spirit. His presence would bring some comfort to her, she thought. Next to Mr. Colborne, he was the person whom she would most have desired to see.

"I'll go to him, Mrs. Jeffson," she said, rising slowly from the sofa. "He was always very good to me. But, oh, how the sight of him will bring back the time at Conventford, when George used to come and see me on Sunday afternoons, and we used to walk together in the cold bare meadows!"

That time did come back to her as she spoke: a gray colourless pause in her life, in which she had been—not happy perhaps, but contented. And since that time, what tropical splendour, what a gorgeous oasis of light and colour, had spread itself suddenly about her path! a forest of miraculous flowers and enchanted foliage that had shut out all the everyday world in which other people dragged out their tiresome existences—a wonderful Asiatic wilderness, in which there were hidden dangers lurking, terrible as the cobras that drop down upon the traveller from some flowering palm-tree, or the brindled tigers that prowl in the shadowy jungle. She looked back across that glimpse of an earthly paradise to the old dull days at Conventford; and a hot blast from the tropical

oasis seemed to rush in upon her, beyond which the past spread far away like a cool gray sea. Perhaps that quiet neutral-tinted life was the best, after all. She saw herself again as she had been; "engaged" to the man who lay dead upstairs; and weaving a poor little web of romance for herself even out of that prosaic situation.

Mr. Raymond was waiting in the best parlour,—that sacred chamber, which had been so rarely used during the parish surgeon's brief wedded life,—that primly-arranged little sitting-room, which always had a faint odour of old-fashioned *pot-pourri;* the room which Isabel had once yearned to beautify into a bower of chintz and muslin. The blind was down, and the shutters half-closed; and in the dim light Charles Raymond looked very pale.

"My dear Mrs. Gilbert," he said, taking her hand and leading her to a seat; "my poor child,—so little more than a child,—so little wiser or stronger than a child,—it seems cruel to come to you at such a time; but life is very hard sometimes—"

"It was very kind of you to come," Isabel exclaimed, interrupting him; "I wanted to see you, or some one like you; for every thing seems so dreadful to me. I never thought that he would die."

She began to cry, in a weary helpless way, not like a person moved by some bitter grief; rather like a child that finds itself in a strange place, and is frightened.

"My poor child, my poor child!"

Charles Raymond still held Isabel's passive hand, and she felt tears dropping on it; the tears of a man, of all others the last to give way to any sentimental weakness. But even then she did not divine that he must have some grief of his own—some sorrow that touched him more nearly than George Gilbert's death could possibly touch him. Her state of feeling just now was a peculiarly selfish state, perhaps; for she could neither understand nor imagine any thing outside that darkened house, where death was supreme. The shock had been too terrible and too recent. It was as if an earthquake had taken place, and all the

atmosphere round her was thick with clouds of blinding dust produced by the concussion. She felt Mr. Raymond's tears dropping slowly on her hand; and if she thought about them at all, she thought them only the evidence of his sympathy with her childish fears and sorrows.

"I loved him like my own son," murmured Charles Raymond, in a low tender voice. "If he had not been what he was,—if he had been the veriest cub that ever disgraced a good old stock,—I think even then I should have loved him as dearly and as truly, for *her* sake. Her only son! I've seen him look at me as she looked when I kissed her in the church on her wedding-day. So long as he lived, I should have never felt that she was really lost to me."

Isabel heard nothing of these broken sentences. Mr. Raymond uttered them in low musing tones, that were not intended to reach any mortal ears. For some little time he sat silently by the girl's side, with her hand still lying in his; then he rose and walked up and down the room with a soft slow step, and with his head drooping.

"You have been very much shocked by your husband's death?" he said at last.

Isabel began to cry again at this question,—weak hysterical tears, that meant very little, perhaps.

"Oh, very, very much," she answered; "I know I was not so good as I ought to have been; and I can never ask him to forgive me now."

"You were very fond of him, I suppose?"

A faint blush flickered and faded upon Isabel's pallid face; and then she answered, hesitating a little,

"He was very good to me, and I—I tried always to be grateful—almost always," she added, with a remorseful recollection of rebellious moments in which she had hated her husband because he ate spring-onions, and wore Graybridge-made boots.

Just the slightest indication of a smile glimmered upon Mr. Raymond's countenance as he watched Isabel's embarrassment. We are such weak and unstable creatures at the very best, that it is just possible this man, who loved Roland Lansdell very dearly, was not entirely grieved by

the discovery of Isabel's indifference for her dead husband. He went back to the chair near hers, and seated himself once more by her side. He began to speak to her in a very low earnest voice; but he kept his eyes bent upon the ground; and in that dusky light she was quite unable to see the expression of his face.

"Isabel," he began, very gravely, "I said just now that life seems very hard to us sometimes,—not to be explained by any doctrine of averages, by any of the codes of philosophy which man frames for his own comfort; only to be understood very dimly by one sublime theory, which some of us are not strong enough to grasp and hold by. Ah, what poor tempest-tossed vessels we are without that compass! I have had a great and bitter grief to bear within the last four-and-twenty hours, Isabel; a sorrow that has come upon me more suddenly than even the shock of your husband's death can have fallen on you."

"I am very sorry for you," Isabel answered, dreamily; "the world must be full of trouble, I think. It doesn't seem as if any one was ever really happy."

She was thinking of her own life, so long to look back upon, though she was little more than twenty years of age; she was thinking of the petty sordid miseries of her girlhood,—the sheriff's officers and tax-gatherers and infuriated tradespeople,—the great shock of her father's disgrace; the dull monotony of her married life; and Roland Lansdell's sudden departure; and his stubborn anger against her when she refused to run away with him; and then her husband's death. It seemed all one dreary record of grief and trouble.

"I am growing old, Isabel," resumed Mr. Raymond; "but I have never lost my sympathy with youth and all its brightness. I think, perhaps, that sympathy has grown wider and stronger with increase of years. There is one young man who has been always very dear to me—more dear to me than I can ever make you comprehend, unless I were to tell you the subtle link that has bound him to me. I suppose there are some fathers who have as deep a love for their sons as I have for the man of whom I speak; but I have always fancied fatherly love a very lukewarm

feeling compared with my affection for Roland Lansdell."

Roland Lansdell! It was the first time she had heard his name spoken since that Sunday on which her husband's illness had begun. The name shot through her heart with a thrill that was nearly akin to pain. A little glimpse of lurid sunshine burst suddenly in upon the darkness of her life. She clasped her hands before her face almost as if it had been actual light that she wanted to shut out.

"Oh, don't speak of him!" she said, piteously. "I was so wicked; I thought of him so much; but I did not know that my husband would die. Please, don't speak of him; it pains me so to hear his name."

She broke down into a torrent of hysterical weeping as she uttered this last entreaty. She remembered Roland's angry face in the church; his studied courtesy during that midnight interview at the Priory, the calm reserve of manner which she had mistaken for indifference. He was nothing to her; he was not even her friend; and she had sinned so deeply against the dead man for his sake.

"I should be the last to mention Roland Lansdell's name in your hearing," Mr. Raymond answered presently, when she had grown a little quieter, "if the events of the last day or two had not broken down all barriers. The time is very near at hand, Isabel, when no name ever spoken upon this earth will be an emptier sound than the name of Roland Lansdell."

She lifted her tear-stained face suddenly and looked at him. All the clouds floated away, and a dreadful light broke in upon her; she looked at him, trembling from head to foot, with her hands clasped convulsively about his arm.

"You came here to tell me something!" she gasped; "something has happened—to him! Ah, if it has, life is *all* sorrow!"

"He is dying, Isabel."

"Dying!"

Her lips shaped the words, and her fixed eyes stared at Charles Raymond's face with an awful look.

"He is dying. It would be foolish to deceive you with any false hope, when in four-and-twenty hours' time all will be finished. He went out—

riding—the other night, and fell from his horse, as it is supposed. He was found by some hay-makers early the next morning, lying helpless, some miles from the Priory, and was carried home. The medical men give no hope of his recovery; but he has been sensible at intervals ever since. I have been a great deal with him—constantly with him; and his cousin Gwendoline is there. He wants to see you, Isabel; of course he knows nothing of your husband's death; I did not know of it myself till I came here this morning. He wants to see you, my poor child. Do you think you can come?"

She rose and bent her head slowly as if in assent, but the fixed look of horror never left her face. She moved towards the door, and seemed as if she wanted to go at once—dressed as she was, with the old faded shawl wrapped about her.

"You'd better get your housekeeper to make you comfortable and tidy, while I go and engage a fly," said Mr. Raymond; and then looking her full in the face, he added, "Can you promise me to be very calm and quiet when you see him?

You had better not come unless you can promise me as much as that. His hours are numbered, as it is; but any violent emotion would be immediately fatal. A man's last hours are very precious to him, remember; the hours of a man who knows his end is near make a sacred mystical period in which the world drops far away from him, and he is in a kind of middle region between this life and the next. I want you to recollect this, Isabel. The man you are going to see is not the man you have known in the past. There would be very little hope for us after death, if we found no hallowing influence in its approach."

"I will recollect," Isabel answered. She had shed no tears since she had been told of Roland's danger. Perhaps this new and most terrible shock had nerved her with an unnatural strength. And amid all the anguish comprehended in the thought of his death, it scarcely seemed strange to her that Roland Lansdell should be dying. It seemed rather as if the end of the world had suddenly come about; and it mattered very little who should be

the first to perish. Her own turn would come very soon, no doubt.

Mr. Raymond met Mrs. Jeffson in the passage and said a few words to her before he went out of the house. The good woman was shocked at the tidings of Mr. Lansdell's accident. She had thought very badly of the elegant young master of Mordred Priory; but death and sorrow take the bitterness out of a true-hearted woman's feelings, and Matilda was womanly enough to forgive Roland for the wish that summoned the Doctor's Wife to his deathbed. She went upstairs, and came down with Isabel's bonnet and cloak and simple toilet paraphernalia; and presently Mrs. Gilbert had a consciousness of cold water splashed upon her face, and a brush passed over her tangled hair. She felt only half-conscious of these things, as she might have felt had they been the events of a dream. So presently, when Mr. Raymond came back, accompanied by the muffled rolling of wheels in the straw-bestrewn lane, and she was half-lifted into the old-fashioned, mouldy-smelling Graybridge fly,—so all along the familiar high-

road, past the old inn with the sloping roof, where the pigeons were cooing to each other, as if there had been no such thing as death or sorrow in the world,—so under the grand gothic gates of monastic Mordred, it was all like a dream—a terrible oppressive dream—hideous by reason of some vague sense of horror rather than by the actual vision presented to the eyes of the sleeper. In a troubled dream it is always thus,—it is always a hidden, intangible something that oppresses the dreamer.

The leaves were fluttering in the warm midsummer wind, and the bees were humming about the great flower-beds. Far away the noise of the waterfall blended with all other summer sounds in a sweet confusion. And he was dying! Oh, what wonderful patches of shadow and sunlight on the wide lawns! what marvellous glimpses down long glades, where the young fern heaved to and fro in the fitful breezes like the emerald wavelets of a summer-sea! And he was dying! It is such an old, old feeling, this unwillingness to comprehend that there *can be* death any where

upon an earth that is so beautiful. Eve may have felt very much as Isabel felt to-day, when she saw a tropical sky, serenely splendid, above the corpse of murdered Abel. Hero may have found the purple distances of the classic mountains, the yellow glory of the sunlit sands, almost more difficult to bear than the loss of her drowned lover. But it is only when a Napoleon dies that there is tempest and stormcloud, young trees uprooted by the whirlwind, and general desolation in unison with the dread terror of a great man's death.

There was the same solemn hush at Mordred Priory that there had been in the surgeon's house at Graybridge; only there seemed a deeper solemnity here amid all the darkened splendour of the spacious rooms, stretching far away, one beyond another, like the chambers of a palace. Isabel saw the long vista, not as she had seen it once, when *he* came into the hall to bid her welcome, but with the haunting dreamlike oppression strong upon her. She saw little glimmering patches of gilding and colour here and there in the cool

gloom of the shaded rooms, and long bars of light shining through the venetian shutters upon the polished oaken floors. One of the medical men —there were three or four of them in the house— came out of the library and spoke in a whisper to Mr. Raymond. The result of the whispering seemed tolerably favourable, for the doctor went back to his companions in the library, and Charles Raymond led Isabel up the broad staircase; the beautiful staircase which seemed to belong to a church or a cathedral rather than to any common habitation.

They met a nurse in the corridor; a prim, pleasant-looking woman, who answered Mr. Raymond's questions in a cheerful business-like manner, as if a Roland Lansdell or so more or less in the world were a matter of very small consequence. And then a mist came before Isabel's eyes, and she lost consciousness of the ground on which she trod; and presently there was a faint odour of hartshorn and aromatic medicines, and she felt a soft hand sponging her forehead with eau-de-Cologne, and a woman's muslin garments flutter-

ing near her. And then she raised her eyelids with a painful sense of their weight, and a voice very close to her, said,

"It was very kind of you to come. I am afraid the heat of the room makes you faint. If you could contrive to let in a little more air, Raymond. It was very good of you to come."

Oh, he was *not* dying! Her heart seemed to leap out of a dreadful frozen region into an atmosphere of warmth and light. He was not dying! Death was not like this. He spoke to her to-day as he had always spoken. It was the same voice, the same low music which she had heard so often mingled with the brawling of the mill-stream; the voice that had sounded perpetually in her dreams by day and night. She forgot that it was a wickedness to have loved him. All her remorse, all her penitence, was gone like a thing that had never been. She was Gretchen, she was Alice, she was any thing that is ignorant and loving and foolish; and he was not dying!

She slipped from her chair and fell upon her knees by the bedside. There was nothing violent

or melodramatic in the movement; it seemed almost involuntary, half unconscious.

"Oh, I am so glad to hear you speak!" she said; "it makes me so happy—to see you like this. They told me that you were very, very ill; they told me that—"

"They told you the truth," Roland answered gravely. "Oh, dear Mrs. Gilbert, you must try and forget what I have been, or you will never be able to understand what I am. And I was so tired of life, and thought I had so little interest in the universe; and yet I feel so utterly changed a creature now that all earthly hope has really slipped away from me. I sent for you, Isabel, because in this last interview I want to acknowledge all the wrong I have done you; I want to ask your forgiveness for that wrong."

"Forgiveness—from me! Oh, no, no!"

She could not abandon her old attitude of worship. He was a prince always—noble or wicked—a prince by divine right of his splendour and beauty! If he stooped from his high estate to smile upon her, was he not entitled to her

deepest gratitude, her purest devotion? If it pleased him to spurn and trample her beneath his feet, what was she, when counted against the magnificence of her idol, that she should complain? There is always some devoted creature prostrate in the road when the car comes by; and which of them would dream of upbraiding Juggernaut for the anguish inflicted by the crushing wheels?

The same kind hands which had bathed Mrs. Gilbert's forehead half lifted her from her kneeling attitude now; and looking up, Isabel saw Lady Gwendoline bending over her, very pale, very grave, but with a sweet compassionate smile upon her face. Lord Ruysdale and his daughter had come to the Priory immediately after hearing of Roland's dangerous state; and during the four-and-twenty hours that had elapsed, Lady Gwendoline had been a great deal with her cousin. The hidden love which had turned to jealous anger against Roland's folly regained all its purer qualities now, and there was no sacrifice of self or self-love that Gwendoline Pomphrey would have hesitated to make, if in so doing she could have re-

stored life and vigour to the dying man. She had heard the worst the doctors had to tell. She knew that her cousin was dying. She was no woman to delude herself with vain hopes, to put away the cup for a while because it was bitter, knowing that its last drop must be drained sooner or later. She bowed her head before the inevitable, and accepted her sorrow. Never in her brightest day, when her portrait had been in every West-end print-shop, and her name a synonym for all that is elegant and beautiful,—never had she seemed so perfect a woman as now, when she sat, pale and quiet and resigned, by the deathbed of the man she loved.

During that long night of watching, Mr. Lansdell's mind had seemed at intervals peculiarly clear,—the fatal injuries inflicted upon his brain had not blotted out his intellect. That had been obscured in occasional periods of wandering and stupor, but every now and then the supremacy of spirit over matter reasserted itself, and the young man talked even more calmly than usual. All the fitfulness of passion, the wavering of purpose —now hot, now cold, now generous, now cruel,—all

natural weakness seemed to have been swept away, and an unutterable calm had fallen upon his heart and mind.

"I never thought I could come to this, Gwendoline," he said. "O God, have pity upon me! What presumptuous stuff I have talked about the limits of possibility, the transformations of matter! and how utterly powerless I was to comprehend such a change as that which has come to me during the past few hours! I have sneered at good men's records of deathbed repentances, and all that simple pious prosiness which Christian men and women talk when they are dying; and yet—and yet, Gwendoline, the change has come, and I think I see a little way farther than of old. Something,—oh, so vague and shadowy, that no words of mine can tell of it,—something opens all at once before my eyes. You have been out riding on a stormy day, haven't you? and have seen the dull low sky closing in all the earth, dense and impenetrable, until suddenly there has been just a little cleft in the darkness, and you have seen through to the higher heavens beyond,

—oh, so far above that low brooding sky, which seemed just before the uttermost boundary of the universe. I have been under the low sky a long time, my dear; but I think there is a cleft in the darkness now, and I can see just a glimpse of the splendour. I do not feel as if I were dying. I do not believe this change which is so near me is the kind of death I once believed in. It is not the end, Gwendoline. The light that has come to me is strong enough to show me as much as that. It is not the end."

Once, on waking from a brief doze, he found his cousin watching, but the nurse asleep, and began to talk of Isabel Gilbert. "I want you to know all about her," he said; "you have only heard vulgar scandal and gossip. I should like you to know the truth. It is very foolish, that little history—wicked perhaps; but those provincial gossips may have garbled and disfigured the story. I will tell you the truth, Gwendoline; for I want you to be a friend to Isabel Gilbert when I am dead and gone."

And then he told the history of all those meetings under Lord Thurston's oak; dwelling tenderly

on Isabel's ignorant simplicity, blaming himself for all that was guilty and dishonourable in that sentimental flirtation. He told Gwendoline how, from being half amused, half gratified, by Mrs. Gilbert's unconcealed admiration of him, so naïvely revealed in every look and tone, he had, little by little, grown to find the sole happiness of his life in those romantic meetings; and then he spoke of his struggles with himself, real earnest struggles —his flight—his return—his presumptuous belief that Isabel would freely consent to any step he might propose—his anger and disappointment after the final interview, which proved to him how little he had known the depths of that girlish sentimental heart.

"She was only a child playing with fire, Gwendoline," he said; "and had not the smallest desire to walk through the furnace. That was my mistake. She was a child, and I mistook her for a woman—a woman who saw the gulf before her, and was prepared to take the desperate leap. She was only a child, pleased with my pretty speeches and town-made clothes

and perfumed handkerchiefs,—a schoolgirl; and I set my life upon the chance of being happy with her. Will you try and think of her as she really is, Gwendoline,—not as these Graybridge people see her,—and be kind to her when I am dead and gone? I should like to think she was sure of one wise and good woman for a friend. I have been very cruel to her, very unjust, very selfish. I was never in the same mind about her for an hour together,—sometimes thinking tenderly of her, sometimes upbraiding and hating her as a trickstress and a coquette. But I can understand her and believe in her much better now. The sky is higher, Gwendoline."

If Roland had told his cousin this story a week before, when his life seemed all before him, she might have received his confidence in a very different spirit from that in which she now accepted it: but he was dying, and she had loved him, and had been loved by him. It was by her own act that she had lost that love. She of all others had least right to resent his attachment to another woman. She remembered that day, nearly ten

years ago, on which she had quarrelled with him, stung by his reproaches, insolent in the pride of her young beauty and the knowledge that she might marry a man so high above Roland Lansdell in rank and position. She saw herself as she had been, in all the early splendour of her Saxon beauty, and wondered if she really was the same creature as that proud worldly girl who thought the supremest triumph in life was to become the wife of a marquis.

"I will be her friend, Roland," she said presently. "I know she is very childish; and I will be patient with her and befriend her, poor lonely girl."

Lady Gwendoline was thinking, as she said this, of that interview in the surgeon's parlour at Graybridge—that interview in which Isabel had not scrupled to confess her folly and wickedness.

"I ought to have been more patient," Gwendoline thought; "but I think I was angry with her because she had dared to love Roland. I was jealous of his love for her, and I could not be kind or tolerant."

Thus it was that Isabel found Lady Gwendoline so tender and compassionate to her. She only raised her eyes to the lady's face with a grateful look. She forgot all about the interview at Graybridge; what *could* she remember in that room, except that *he* was ill? in danger, people had told her; but she could not believe that. The experience of her husband's deathbed had impressed her with an idea that dangerous illness must be accompanied by terrible prostration, delirium, raging fever, dull stupor. She saw Roland in one of his best intervals, reasonable, cheerful, self-possessed, and she could not believe that he was going to die. She looked at him, and saw that his face was bloodless, and that his head was bound by linen bandages, which concealed his forehead. A fall from his horse! She remembered how she had seen him once ride by upon the dusty road, unconscious of her presence, grand and self-absorbed as Count Lara; but amongst all her musings she had never imagined any danger coming to him in that shape. She had fancied him always as a dauntless rider, taming the wildest steed with

one light pressure of his hand upon the curb. She looked at him sorrowfully, and the vision of his accident arose before her; she saw the horse tearing across a moonlit waste, and then a fall, and then a figure dragged along the ground. She had read of such things: it was only some old half-forgotten scene out of one of her books that rose in her mind.

No doubt as to the nature of Mr. Lansdell's accident, no glimmering suspicion of the truth, ever entered her brain. She believed most fully that she had herself prevented all chance of an encounter between her father and his enemy. Had she not seen the last of Mr. Sleaford in Nessborough Hollow, whence he was to depart for Wareham station at break of day? and what should take Roland Lansdell to that lonely glade in which the little rustic inn was hidden,—a resting-place for haymakers and gipsy-hawkers?

She never guessed the truth. The medical men who attended Roland Lansdell knew that the injuries from which he was dying had never been caused by any fall from a horse; and they said as

much to Charles Raymond, who was unutterably distressed by the intelligence. But neither he nor the doctors could obtain any admission from the patient, though Mr. Raymond most earnestly implored him to reveal the truth.

"Cure me, if you can," he said; "nothing that I can tell you will give you any help in doing that. If it is my fancy to keep the cause of my death a secret, it is the whim of a dying man, and it ought to be respected. No living creature upon this earth except one man will ever know how I came by these injuries. But I do hope that you gentlemen will be discreet enough to spare my friends any useless pain. The gossips are at work already, I daresay, speculating as to what became of the horse that threw me. For pity's sake, do your best to stop their talk. My life has been sluggish enough; do not let there be any *esclandre* about my death."

Against such arguments as these Charles Raymond could urge nothing. But his grief for the loss of the young man he loved was rendered doubly bitter by the mystery which sur-

rounded Roland's fate. The doctors told him that the wounds on Mr. Lansdell's head could only have been caused by merciless blows inflicted with some blunt instrument. Mr. Raymond in vain distracted himself with the endeavour to imagine how or why the young man had been attacked. He had not been robbed; for his watch and purse, his rings, and the little trinkets hanging at his chain, all of them costly in their nature, had been found upon him when he was brought home to the Priory. That Roland Lansdell could have counted one enemy amongst all mankind, never entered into his kinsman's calculations. He had no recollection of that little story told so lightly by the young man in the flower-garden; he was entirely without a clue to the catastrophe; and he perceived very plainly that Roland's resolution was not to be shaken. There was a quiet determination in Mr. Lansdell's refusal, which left no hope that he might be induced to change his mind. He spoke with all apparent frankness of the result of his visit to Nessborough Hollow. He had found Isabel there, he

said, with a man who was related to her,—a poor relation, who had come to Graybridge to extort money from her. He had seen and spoken to the man, and was fully convinced that his account of himself was true.

"So you see the Graybridge gossips had lighted on the usual mare's-nest," Roland said in conclusion; "the man was a relation,—an uncle or cousin, I believe,—I heard it from his own lips. If I had been a gentleman, I should have been superior to the foul suspicions that maddened me that night. What common creatures we are, Raymond, some of us! Our mothers believe in us, and worship us, and watch over us, and seem to fancy they have dipped us in a kind of moral Styx, and that there is something of the immortal infused into our vulgar clay; but rouse our common passions, and we sink to the level of the navigator who beats his wife to death with a poker in defence of his outraged honour. They put a kind of varnish over us at Eton and Oxford; but the colouring underneath is very much the same, after all. Your King Arthur, or Sir

Philip Sidney, or Bayard, crops up once in a century or so, and the world bows down before a gentleman; but, oh, what a rare creature he is!"

"I want you to forgive me," Roland said to Isabel, after she had been sitting some minutes in the low chair in which Lady Gwendoline had placed her. There was no one in the room but Charles Raymond and Gwendoline Pomphrey; and Mr. Raymond had withdrawn himself to a distant window that had been pushed a little way open, near which he sat in a very mournful attitude, with his face averted from the sick-bed. "I want you to forgive me for having been very unjust and cruel to you, Mrs. Gilbert—Isabel. Ah, I may call you Isabel now, and no one will cry out upon me! Dying men have all manner of pleasant privileges. I was very cruel, very unjust, very selfish and wicked, my poor girl; and your childish ignorance was wiser than my worldly experience. A man has no right to desire perfect happiness: I can understand that now. He has no right to defy the laws made

by wiser men for his protection, because there is a fatal twist in the fabric of his life, and those very laws happen to thwart him in his solitary insignificance. How truly Thomas Carlyle has told us that Manhood only begins when we have surrendered to Necessity! We must submit, Isabel. I struggled; but I never submitted. I tried to crush and master the pain; but I never resigned myself to endure it; and endurance is so much grander than conquest. And then, when I had yielded to the tempter, when I had taken my stand, prepared to defy heaven and earth, I was angry with you, poor child, because you were not alike rash and desperate. Forgive me, my dear; I loved you very much; and it is only now, now when I am dying, that I know how fatal and guilty my love was. But it was never a profligate's brief passion, Isabel. It was wicked to love you; but my love was pure. If you had been free to be my wife, I should have been a true and faithful husband to my childish love. Ah, even now, when life seems so far away; even now, Isabel, the old picture rises before me,

and I fancy what might have been if I had found you free."

The low penetrating voice reached Charles Raymond, and he bent his head and sobbed aloud. Dimly, as the memory of a dream, came back upon him the recollection of that time in which he had sat amongst the shadows of the great beech-trees at Hurstonleigh, with the young man's poems open in his hand, and had been beguiled into thinking of what might happen if Roland returned to England to see Isabel in her girlish beauty. And Roland had returned, and had seen her; but too late; and now she was free once more,—free to be loved and chosen,—and again it was too late. Perhaps Mr. Raymond seems only a foolish sentimentalist, weeping because of the blight upon a young man's love-story; but then he had loved the young man's mother,—and in vain!

"Gwendoline has promised to be your friend, Isabel," Roland said by and by; "it makes me very happy to know that. Oh, my darling, if I could tell you the thoughts that came to me as I lay there, with the odour of leaves and flowers

about me, and the stars shining above the tall branches over my head. *What* is impossible in a universe where there are such stars? It seemed as if I had never seen them until then. It used to be so difficult to me to believe. I think all the *ignes fatui* of the world must have glimmered and danced before my eyes, so that I could not see those unspeakable lights above. They all went out at once, the foul marshy exhalations, like the lamps in a theatre when the curtain goes down. I am changed, Isabel; but it is no earthly conversion achieved by books and sermons. When God pleases, He says, Let there be light; and the fool is wise. That raising of the dead in Jerusalem was only typical of the miracles which were to come afterwards. Have you ever read the letters of some condemned wretch waiting the hour of his execution? What an exaltation pervades them! The unhappy creature can scarcely spell, perhaps; but he pours out long ungrammatical rhapsodies about heaven and glory; and you shrug your shoulders, and cry, Cant! hypocrisy! And yet it *may* be real, after all. No ordinary man, sound in

health, presumptuous in the expectation of a long life before him, can understand the feelings of a man who is face to face with death. Death, which loses the worst of its terrors when we begin to feel that it is not the end! Only when we are very close to the gate can we see the far country beyond. I remember when I was a little boy I used to think the world was flat, like a great prairie; so that the too presumptuous traveller, coming to the edge of it, tumbled over headlong into chaos. I smile even now when I think of that foolish fancy; but perhaps some of my fancies since that time have been very little wiser than that."

He rambled on thus, with Isabel's hand held loosely in his. He seemed to be very happy—entirely at peace. Gwendoline had proposed to read to him; and the parish rector had been with him, urging the duty of some religious exercises, eager to exhort and to explain; but the young man had smiled at him with some shade of contempt in his expression.

"There is very little you could read from that book which I do not already know by heart," he

said, pointing to the Bible lying open under the clergyman's hand. "It is not your unbeliever who least studies his gospel. Imagine a man possessed of a great crystal that looks like a diamond. His neighbours tell him that the gem is priceless—matchless—without crack or flaw. But some evil thing within the man suggests that it may be valueless after all—only a big beautiful lump of glass. You may fancy that he would examine it very closely; he would scrutinise every facet, and contemplate it in every light, and perhaps know a good deal more about it than the believing possessor, who, feeling confident in the worth of his jewel, puts it safely away in a strong box against the hour when it may be wanted. I know all about the Gospel, Mr. Matson; and I think, as my hours are numbered, it may be better for me to lie and ponder upon those familiar words. The light breaks upon me very slowly; but it all comes from a far distant sky; and no earthly hand can lift so much as the uttermost edge of the curtain that shuts out the fuller splendour.' I am very near him now; I am very near 'the shadow,

cloaked from head to foot, who keeps the keys of all the creeds!'"

The conscientious rector thought Mr. Lansdell a very unpromising penitent; but it was something to hear that the young man did not rail or scoff at religion on his dying-bed; and even that might have been expected of a person who had attended divine service only once in six weeks, and had scandalised a pious and well-bred congregation by undisguised yawns, and absent-minded contemplation of his filbert-nails during the respectable prosiness of a long sermon.

The rector did not understand this imperfect conversion, expressed in phrases that sounded the reverse of orthodox; but the state of matters in that death-chamber was much better than he had expected. He had heard it hinted that Mr. Lansdell was a Freethinker—a Deist; even an Atheist, some people had said; and he had half anticipated to find the young man blaspheming aloud in the throes of his dying agony. He had not been prepared for this quiet deathbed; this man, who was dying with a smile upon his face,

murmuring alternate fragments of St. John's gospel and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Addison himself, holding up his own bearing as a model for all Christian mankind, could scarcely have conducted himself more respectably than this cynical young lounger, whose life, vaguely reported at county dinner-tables, had scandalised all Midlandshire.

"I was with my mother when she died," Roland said by and by, "and yet could not accept the simple faith that made her so happy. But I daresay Saul had seen many wonderful things before that journey to Damascus. Had he not witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen, and had yet been unmoved? The hour comes, and the miracle comes with it. Oh, what an empty wasted life mine has been for the last ten years! because I could not understand—I could not see beyond. I might have done so much perhaps, if I could only have seen my way beyond the contradictions and perplexities of this lower life. But I could not—I could not; and so I fell back into a sluggish idleness, 'without a conscience or an aim.' I 'basked and battened in the woods.'"

The rector lingered in the house even after he left Roland's chamber. He would be summoned by and by perhaps, and the dying man would require some more orthodox consolation than was to be derived from Mr. Tennyson's verses.

But Roland seemed very happy—happier than he had been since his early manhood, when he had made his one brief struggle to do something good for the working-man. There was a brightness upon his face, in spite of its deathlike pallor—a spiritual brightness, unaffected by any loss of blood, or languor of that slow pulse which the London physicians felt so often. For some two or three hours after the struggle in Nessborough Hollow he had lain stunned and unconscious; then he had slowly awakened to see the stars fading above the branches over his head, and to hear the early morning breeze creeping with a ghostly rustling noise amidst the fern. He awoke to feel that something of an unwonted nature had happened to him, but not for some time to any distinct remembrance of his encounter with Mr. Sleaford.

He tried to move, but found himself utterly

powerless,—a partial paralysis seemed to have changed his limbs to lead; he could only lie as he had fallen; dimly conscious of the fading stars above, the faint summer wind rippling a distant streamlet, and all the vague murmur of newly-awakening nature. He knew as well as if a whole conclave of physicians had announced their decision upon his case,—he knew that for him life was over; and that if there was any vitality in his mind, any sense of a future in his breast, that sense, so vague and imperfect as yet, could only relate to something beyond this earth.

"I know that I am dying, and yet there is no death in my mind," he thought. "*Is* there something afterwards—something beyond the last pulsation of the heart? Oh, phrenologists, who teach us that the noblest sentiments of our minds are only so much gray matter, perishing eternally with the benumbing of our spinal marrows,—physiologists, preachers of the doctrine which makes the universe an ascending-scale of mechanical progression, and man, at his best and brightest, nothing more than the latest develop-

ment of the tadpole and the civilised half-brother of the gorilla,—I wonder whether you are all wrong, after all. Are only the little children wise? Are the ignorant foolish creatures that I have seen mumbling simple supplications in the dusky aisles of Belgian cathedrals,—are they nearer the light than all the princes of modern science, who take the soul out of a man's breast, and tell him of what stuff it is made?"

Very rambling fancies filled Mr. Lansdell's mind as he lay amongst the bruised fern, with the wild-rose brambles and blossoms above him. He knew that his life was done; he knew that for him all interest in this earth and its creatures had ceased for ever; and a perfect calm came down upon him. He was like a man who had possessed a great fortune, and had been perpetually tormented by doubts and perplexities about it, and who, waking one morning to discover himself a beggar, found a strange relief in the knowledge that he was penniless. The struggle was all over. No longer could the tempter whisper in his ear, urging him to follow this or

that wandering exhalation of the world's foul marsh-lands. No more for him irresolution or perplexity. The problem of life was solved; a new and unexpected way was opened for him out of the blank weariness which men call existence. At first the thought of his approaching release brought with it no feeling but a sense of relief. It was only afterwards, when the new aspect of things became familiar to him, that he began to think with remorseful pain of all the empty life that lay behind him. He seemed to be thinking of this even when Isabel was with him; for after lying for some time quite silent,—in a doze, as they thought who watched him,—he raised his heavy eyelids, and said to her,

"If ever you should find yourself with the means of doing great good, of being very useful to your fellow-creatures, I should like you to remember my wasted life, Isabel. You will try to be patient, won't you, my dear? You will not think, because you are baulked in your first pet scheme for the regeneration of mankind, that you are free to wash your hands of the business,

and stand aloof shrugging your shoulders at other people's endeavours. Ten years ago I fancied myself a philanthropist; but I was like a child who plants an acorn over-night, and expects to see the tender leaflets of a sapling-oak sprouting through the brown earth next morning. I wanted to do great things all at once. My courage failed before the battle had well begun. But I want you to be different from me, my dear. You were wiser than I when you left me that day; when you left me to my foolish anger, my sinful despair. Our love *was* too pure to have survived the stain of treachery and guilt. It would have perished like some beautiful flame that expires in a tainted atmosphere. Impure love may flourish in a poisoned habitation; but the true god sickens and dies if you shut him from the free air of heaven. I know now that we should not have been happy, Isabel; and I acknowledge the mysterious wisdom that has saved us. My darling, do not look at me with those despairing eyes; death will unite us rather than separate us, Isabel. I should have been

farther away from you if I had lived; for I was tired of my life. I was like a spoilt child, who has possessed all the toys ever devised by mortal toymaker, and has played with them all, and grown weary of them, and broken them. Only his nurses know what an abomination that child is. I might have become a very bad man if I had lived, Isabel. As it is, I begin to understand what Tennyson means. I used to read him only in a critic's cynical spirit, or rather in the narrow-minded spirit of that literary Janus, who is himself an author, and pretends to possess the disinterestedness necessary to criticise the writings of other people, while he only disguises his malice and jealousy under the mantle of affectedly-impartial criticism. I used to steal Tennyson's metres and pretty tricks of style, and twist them into my own pitiful mulings; and now, only now, I begin to understand how much more than a poet he is. He has written the gospel of his age, Isabel. He has told me what I am: 'an infant crying in the night; an infant crying for the light; and with no language but a cry.' "

These were the last words that Roland Lansdell ever spoke to the Doctor's Wife. He fell back into the same half-slumber from which he had awakened to talk to her; and some one—she scarcely knew who it was—led her out of the sick chamber, and a little way along the corridor into another room, where the venetian shutters were half open, and there was sunshine and splendour.

Then, as if in a dream, she found herself lying on a bed; a bed that seemed softer than the billows of the sea, and around which there were curtains of pale green silk and shadowy muslin, and a faint odour like incense hovering about every thing. As in a dream, Isabel saw Lady Gwendoline and the nurse bending over her; and then one of them told her to go to sleep; she must want rest; she had been sorely tried lately.

"You are among friends," the soft patrician voice murmured. "I know that I wronged you very much, poor child; but I have promised *him* that I will be your friend."

The soft curtains fell with a rustling noise between Isabel and the light, and she knew that she was alone; but still the dream-like feeling held her senses as in a spell. Does not simple, practical Sir Walter Scott, writing of the time of his wife's burial, tell us that it was all like a dream to him; he could not comprehend or lay hold of the dread reality? And is it any wonder, therefore, if to this romantic girl the calamity that had so suddenly befallen her seemed like a dream? He was dying! every one said that it was so; he himself spoke of his death calmly as a settled thing; and no one gainsayed him. And yet she could not believe in the cruel truth. Was he not there, talking to her and advising her? his intellect unclouded as when he had taught her how to criticise her favourite poets in the bright summer-days that were gone. No, a thousand times no; she would *not* believe that he was to die. Like all people who have enjoyed a very close acquaintance with poverty, she had an exaggerated idea of the power of wealth. Those great physicians, summoned from

Savile Row, and holding solemn conclave in the library,—they would surely save him; they would fan that feeble flame back into new life. What was medical science worth, if it was powerless to save this one sick man? And then the prayers which had seemed cold and lifeless on her lips when she had supplicated for George Gilbert's restoration took a new colour, and were as if inspired.

She pushed aside the curtains and got up from the bed where they had told her to sleep. She went to the door and opened it a little way; but there was no sound to be heard in the long corridor where the portraits of dead-and-gone Lansdells—all seeming to her more or less like him—looked sadly down from the wainscot. A flood of hot sunshine poured into the room, but she had no definite idea of the hour. She had lost all count of time since the sudden shock of her husband's death; and she did not even know the day of the week. She only knew that the world seemed to have come to an end, and that it was very hard to be left alone in a deserted universe.

For a long time she knelt by the bedside praying that Roland Lansdell might live—only that he might live. She would be contented and happy, she thought, to know that all the world lay between her and him, if she could only know that he lived. There was no vestige of any selfish desire in her mind. Childishly, ignorantly, as a child might supplicate for the life of its mother, did this girl pray for the recovery of Roland Lansdell. No thought of her new freedom, no foreshadowing of what might happen if he could be restored to health, disturbed the simple fervour of her prayers. She only wanted him to live.

The sun sloped westward, and still shone upon that kneeling figure. Perhaps Isabel had a vague notion that the length of her prayers might prevail. They were very rambling, unorthodox petitions. It is not every mourner who can cry, "Thy will be done." Pitiful and weak and foolish are some of the lamentations that rise to the Eternal Throne.

At last, when Isabel had been some hours alone and undisturbed in that sunlit chamber, an

cager yearning to see Roland Lansdell once more came upon her,—to see him, or at least to hear tidings of him; to hear that a happy change had come about; that he was sleeping peacefully, wrapt in a placid slumber that gave promise of recovery. Ah, what unspeakable delight it would be to hear something like this! And sick men had been spared before to-day.

Her heart thrilled with a sudden rapture of hope. She went to the door and opened it, and then stood upon the threshold listening. All was silent as it had been before. No sound of footsteps, no murmur of voices, penetrated the massive old walls. There was no passing servant in the corridor whom she could question as to Mr. Lansdell's state. She waited with faint hope that Lady Gwendoline or the sick-nurse might come out of Roland's room; but she waited in vain. The western sunlight shining redly through a lantern in the roof of the corridor illumined the sombre faces of the dead Lansdells with a factitious glow of life and colour; pensive faces, darkly earnest faces—all with some look of the man who was

lying in the chamber yonder. The stillness of that long corridor seemed to freeze Isabel's childish hopes. The flapping of a linen blind outside the lantern sounded like the fluttering of a sail at sea; but inside the house there was not so much as a breath or a whisper.

The stillness and the suspense grew unendurable. The Doctor's Wife moved away from the door, and crept nearer and nearer the dark oaken door at the end of the corridor—the ponderous barrier that shut her from Roland Lansdell. She dared not knock at that door, lest the sound should disturb *him*. Some one must surely come out into the corridor before long,—Mr. Raymond, or Lady Gwendoline, or the nurse,—some one who could give her hope and comfort.

She went towards the door, and suddenly saw that the door of the next room was ajar. From this room came the low murmur of voices; and Isabel remembered all at once that she had seen an apartment opening out of that in which Roland Lansdell lay—a large pleasant-looking chamber, with a high oaken mantel-piece, above which

she had seen the glimmer of guns and pistols, and a picture of a horse.

She went into this room. It was empty, and the murmur of voices came from the adjoining chamber. The door between the two rooms was open, and she heard something more than voices. There was the sound of low convulsive sobbing; very subdued, but very terrible to hear. She could not see the sick man, for there was a little group about his bed, a group of bending figures, that made a screen between her and him. She saw Lady Gwendoline on her knees at the bottom of the bed, with her face buried in the silken coverlet, and her arms thrown up above her head; but in the next moment Charles Raymond saw her, and came to her. He closed the door softly behind him, and shut out that group of bending figures. She would have spoken; but he lifted his hand with a solemn gesture.

"Come away, my dear," he said softly. "Come with me, Isabel."

"Oh, let me see him! let me speak to him! Only once more—only once!"

"Never again, Isabel,—never upon this earth any more! You must think of him as something infinitely better and brighter than you ever knew him here. I never saw such a smile upon a human face as I saw just now on his."

She had no need of any plainer words to tell her he was dead. She felt the ground reel suddenly beneath her feet, and saw the gradual rising of a misty darkness that shut out the world, and closed about her like the silent waters through which a drowning man goes down to death.

CHAPTER THE LAST.

"IF ANY CALM, A CALM DESPAIR."

Lady Gwendoline kept her promise. What promises are so sacred as those that are made to the dying, and which become solemn engagements binding us to the dead—the dead whom we have wronged, most likely; for who is there amongst us who does not do some wrong to the creature he most tenderly loves? Gwendoline Pomphrey repented her jealous anger against her cousin; she bitterly lamented those occasions upon which she had felt a miserable joy in the probing of his wounds. She looked back, now that the blindness of passion had passed away with the passing of the dead, and saw herself as she had really been—unchristian, intolerant, possessed by a jealous anger, which she had hidden under the useful womanly mask of outraged propriety. It was not Roland's sin that

had stung her proud spirit to the quick: it was her love for the sinner that had been outraged by his devotion to another woman.

She never knew that she had sent the man she loved to his death. Inflexible to the last, Roland Lansdell had kept the secret of that fatal meeting in Nessborough Hollow. The man who had caused his death was Isabel's father. If Roland had been vindictively disposed towards his enemy, he would, for her sake, have freely let him go: but no very vengeful impulse had stirred the failing pulses of his heart. He was scarcely angry with Jack the Scribe; but rather recognised in what had occurred the working of a strange fatality, or the execution of a divine judgment.

"I was ready to defy heaven and earth for the sake of this girl," he thought. "I fancied it was an easy thing for a man to make his own scheme of life, and be happy after his own fashion. It was well that I should be made to understand my position in the universe. Mr. Sleaford was only a brutal kind of Nemesis wait-

ing for me at the bottom of the hill. If I had tried to clamber upwards,—if I had buckled on my armour, and gone away from this castle of indolence, to fight in the ranks of my fellow-men,—I need never have met the avenger. Let him go, then. He has only done his appointed work; and I, who made so pitiful a use of my life, have small ground for complaint against the man who has shortened it by a year or two."

Thus it was that Mr. Sleaford went his own way. In spite of that murderous threat uttered by him in the Old Bailey dock, in spite of the savage violence of his attack upon Roland Lansdell, he had not perhaps meant to kill his enemy. In his own way of expressing it, he had not meant to go too far. There is a wide gulf between the signing of other people's names, or the putting an additional *y* after the word *eight*, and an unauthorised 0 after the numeral on the face of a cheque—there is an awful distance between such illegal accomplishments and an act of deliberate homicide. Mr. Sleaford had only intended to "punish" the "languid swell" who

had borne witness against him; to spoil his beauty for the time being; and, in short, to give him just cause for remembering that little amateur-detective business by which he had beguiled the elegant idleness of his life. Isabel's father had scarcely intended to do more than this. But when you beat a man about the head with a loaded bludgeon, it is not so very easy to draw the line of demarcation between an assault and a murder; and Mr. Sleaford did go a little too far: as he learned a few days afterwards, when he read in the *Times* supplement an intimation of the sudden death of Roland Lansdell, Esq., of Mordred Priory, Midlandshire.

The strong man, reading this announcement in the parlour of a low public-house in one of the most obscure purlieus of Lambeth, felt an icy sensation of fear that he had never experienced before amidst all the little difficulties attendant upon the forging of negotiable autographs. *This* was something more than he had bargained for. This Midlandshire business was murder, or something so nearly resembling that last and worst

of crimes, that a stupid jury might fail to recognise the distinction. Jack the Scribe, armed with Roland Lansdell's fifty pounds, had already organised a plan of operations which was likely to result in a very comfortable little income, without involving any thing so disagreeable to the feelings of a gentleman as the illegal use of other people's names. It was to the science of money-lending that Mr. Sleaford had turned his attention; and during the enforced retirement of the last few years he had woven for himself a very neat little system, by which a great deal of interest, in the shape of inquiry-fees and preliminary postage-stamps, could be extorted out of simple-minded borrowers without any expenditure in the way of principal on the part of the lender. With a view to the worthy carrying out of this little scheme, Mr. Sleaford had made an appointment with one of his old associates, who appeared to him a likely person to act as clerk or underling, and to double that character with the more dignified *rôle* of solicitor to the MUTUAL AND COÖPERATIVE FRIEND-IN-NEED AND FRIEND-

INDEED SOCIETY; but after reading that dismal paragraph respecting Mr. Lansdell in the supplement of the *Times*, Jack the Scribe's ideas underwent a considerable change. It might be that this big pleasant metropolis, in which there is always such a nice little crop of dupes and simpletons ready to fall prone beneath the sickle of the judicious husbandman, would become, in vulgar parlance, a little too hot to hold Mr. Sleaford. The contemplation of this unpleasant possibility led that gentleman's thoughts away to fairer and more distant scenes. He had a capital of fifty pounds in his pocket. With such a sum for his fulcrum, Jack the Scribe felt himself capable of astonishing—not to say uprooting—the universe; and if an indiscreet use of his bludgeon had rendered it unadvisable for him to remain in his native land, there were plenty of opportunities in the United States of America for a man of his genius. In America—on the "other side," as he had heard his Transatlantic friends designate their country—he might find an appropriate platform for the MUTUAL AND COÖPERATIVE FRIEND-

IN-NEED AND FRIEND-INDEED SOCIETY. The genus dupe is cosmopolitan, and the Transatlantic Arcadian would be just as ready with his postage-stamps as the confiding denizen of Bermondsey or Camden Town. Already in his mind's eye Mr. Sleaford beheld a flaming advertisement of his grand scheme slanting across the back page of a daily newspaper. Already he imagined himself thriving on the simplicity of the New-Yorkers; and departing, enriched and rejoicing, from that delightful city just as the Arcadians were beginning to be a little impatient about the conclusion of operations, and a little backward in the production of postage-stamps.

Having once decided upon the advisability of an early departure from England, Mr. Sleaford lost no time in putting his plans into operation. He strolled out in the dusk of the evening, and made his way to some dingy lanes and water-side alleys in the neighbourhood of London Bridge. Here he obtained all information about speedily departing steam-vessels bound for New York; and early the following morning, burdened only with

a carpet-bag and the smallest of portmanteaus, Jack the Scribe left Euston Square on his way to Liverpool, whence he departed, this time unhindered and unobserved, in the steam-vessel *Washington* bound for New York. And here he drops out of my story, as the avenging goddess might disappear from a classic stage when her work was done. For him too a Nemesis waits, lurking darkly in some hidden turning of the sinuous way along which a scoundrel walks.

"If any calm, a calm despair." Such a calm fell at last upon Isabel Gilbert; but it was slow to come. For a long time it seemed to her as if a dreadful darkness obscured all the world; a darkness in which she groped blindly for a grave, where she might lie down and die. Was not *he* dead? What was there left in all the universe now that he was gone?

Happily for the sufferer there is attendant upon all great mental anguish a kind of numbness, a stupefaction of the senses, which in some manner deadens the sharpness of the torture. For a long

time Isabel could not think of what had happened within the last few troubled weeks. She could only sit helpless and tearless in the little parlour at Graybridge while the funeral preparations went quietly on about her, and while Mrs. Jeffson and the young woman, who went out to work at eighteenpence a-day, came in every now and then to arouse her from her dull stupor for the trying-on of mourning garments which smelt of dye and size, and left black marks upon her neck and arms. She heard the horrible snipping of crape and bombazine going on all day, like the monotonous accompaniment of a nightmare; and sometimes when the door had been left ajar, she heard people talking in the opposite room. She heard them talking in stealthy murmurs of the two funerals which were to take place on successive days —one at Graybridge, one at Mordred. She heard them speculate respecting Mr. Lansdell's disposal of his wealth; she heard the name, the dear romantic name, that was to be nothing henceforward but an empty sound, bandied from lip to lip; and

all this pain was only some portion of the hideous dream which bound her night and day.

People were very kind to her. Even Graybridge took pity upon her youth and desolation; though every pang of her foolish heart was the subject of tea-table speculation. But the accomplished slanderer is not always a malevolently disposed person. He is only like the wit, who loves his jest better than his friend; but who will yet do his friend good service in the day of need. The Misses Pawlkatt, and many other young ladies of standing in Graybridge, wrote Isabel pretty little notes of condolence, interlarded with quotations from Scripture, and offered to go and "sit with her." To "sit with her;" to beguile with their frivolous stereotype chatter the anguish of this poor stupefied creature, for whom all the universe seemed obscured by one impenetrable cloud.

It was on the second day after the surgeon's funeral, the day following that infinitely more stately ceremonial at Mordred church, that Mr. Raymond came to see Isabel. He had been with

her several times during the last few days; but he had found all attempts at consolation utterly in vain, and he, who had so carefully studied human nature, knew that it was wisest and kindest to let her alone. But on this occasion he came on a business errand; and he was accompanied by a grave-looking person, whom he introduced to Isabel as the late Mr. Lansdell's solicitor.

"I have come to bring you strange news, Mrs. Gilbert," he said. "News that cannot fail to be very startling to you."

She looked up at Charles Raymond with a sad smile, whose meaning he was not slow to interpret. It said so plainly, "Do you think any thing that can happen henceforward upon this earth could ever seem strange to me?"

"When you were with—him—on the last day of his life, Isabel," Mr. Raymond continued, "he talked to you very seriously. He changed—changed wonderfully with the near approach of death. It seemed as if the last ten years had been blotted away, and he was a young man again, just entering life, full of noble yearnings

and aspirations. I pray God those ten idle years may never be counted against him. He spoke to you very earnestly, my dear; and he urged you, if ever great opportunities were given you, which they might be, to use them faithfully for his sake. I heard him say this, and was at a loss to understand his full meaning. I comprehend it perfectly now."

He paused; but Isabel did not even look up at him. The tears were slowly pouring down her colourless cheeks. She was thinking of that last day at Mordred; and Roland's tenderly-earnest voice seemed still sounding in her ears.

"Isabel, a great charge has been intrusted to you. Mr. Lansdell has left you the bulk of his fortune."

It is certain that Mr. Raymond expected some cry of surprise, some token of astonishment, to follow this announcement; but Isabel's tears only flowed a little faster, and her head sank forward on the sofa-cushion by her side.

"Had you any idea that Roland intended to leave his money in this manner?"

"Oh, no, no! I don't want the money; I can do nothing with it. Oh, give it to some hospital, please; and let the hospital be called by his name. It was cruel of him to think that I should care for money when he was dead."

"I have reason to believe that this will was made under very peculiar circumstances," Mr. Raymond said presently; "when Roland was labouring under a delusion about you—a delusion which you yourself afterwards dispelled. Mr. Lansdell's solicitor fully understands this; Lord Ruysdale and his daughter also understand it; and no possible discredit can attach to you from the inheritance of this fortune. Had Roland lived, he might very possibly have made some alteration and modifications of this will. As it stands, it is as good a will as any ever proved at Doctors' Commons. You are a very rich woman, Isabel. Lady Gwendoline, her father, and myself are all legatees to a considerable amount; but Mordred Priory and the bulk of the Lansdell property are left to you."

And then Mr. Raymond went on to explain the nature of the will, which left every thing to himself and Mr. Meredith (the London solicitor) as trustees, for the separate use and maintenance of Isabel Gilbert, and a great deal more, which had no significance for the dull indifferent ears of the mourner. There had been a time when Mrs. Gilbert would have thought it a grand thing to be rich, and would have immediately imagined a life spent in ruby-velvet and diamonds; but that time was past. The blessings we sigh for are very apt to come to us too late; like that pension the tidings of which came to the poet as he lay upon his deathbed.

Mordred Priory became the property of Isabel Gilbert; and for a time all that Shakesperian region of Midlandshire had enough to employ them in the discussion of Mr. Lansdell's will. But even the voice of slander was hushed when Mrs. Gilbert left England in the company of Lord Ruysdale and his daughter for a lengthened sojourn on the Continent. I quote here from the *Wareham Gazette*, which found Isabel's proceedings worthy of

record since her inheritance of Mr. Lansdell's property.

Lady Gwendoline had promised to be the friend of Isabel; and she kept her word. There was no bitterness in her heart now; and perhaps she liked George Gilbert's widow all the better on account of that foolish wasted love that made a kind of link between them.

Lord Ruysdale's daughter was not the sort of woman to feel any base envy of Mrs. Gilbert's fortune. The Earl had been very slow to understand the motives of his kinsman's will; but as he and his daughter received a legacy of ten thousand pounds apiece, to say nothing of sundry old Cromwellian tankards, and Queen-Anne teapots fashioned by Paul Lemeri, old-fashioned brooches and bracelets in rose-diamonds, a famous pearl-necklace that had belonged to Lady Anna Lansdell, a Murillo and a Rembrandt, and nineteen dozen of Madeira that connoisseurs considered unique, Lord Ruysdale could scarcely esteem himself ill-treated by his late nephew.

So Mrs. Gilbert was permitted to possess her

new wealth in peace, protected from all scandal by the Ruysdale influence. She was permitted to be at peace; and she went away with Lady Gwendoline and the Earl to those fair foreign lands for which she had pined in the weedy garden at Camberwell. Even during the first bitterness of her sorrow she was not utterly selfish. She sent money to Mrs. Sleaford and the boys—money which seemed enormous wealth to them; and she instructed her solicitor to send them quarterly instalments of an income which would enable her half-brothers to receive a liberal education.

"I have had a great sorrow," she wrote to her stepmother, "and I am going away with people who are very kind to me; not to forget—I would not for the world find forgetfulness, if such a thing was to be found; only that I may learn to bear my sorrow and to be good. When I come back, I shall be glad to see you and my brothers."

She wrote this, and a good deal more that was kind and dutiful, to poor Mrs. Sleaford, who had changed that tainted name to Singleton, in the

peaceful retirement of Jersey; and then she went away, and was taken to many beautiful cities, over all of which there seemed to hang a kind of mist that shut out the sunshine. It was only when Roland Lansdell had been dead more than two years, that she began to understand that no grief, however bitter, can entirely obscure the beauty of the universe. She began to feel that there is something left in life even when a first romantic love is nothing but a memory; a peace which is so nearly akin to happiness, that we scarcely regret the flight of the brighter spirit; a calm which lies beyond the regions of despair, and which is unruffled by those vague fears, those shadowy forebodings, that are apt to trouble the joyful heart.

And now it seems to me that I have little more to do with Isabel Gilbert. She passes away from me into a higher region than that in which my story has lain,—useful, serene, almost happy, but very constant to the memory of sorrow,—she

is altogether different from the foolish wife who neglected all a wife's duties while she sat by the mill-stream at Thurston's Crag reading the "Revolt of Islam." There is a great gulf between a girl of nineteen and a woman of five-and-twenty; and Isabel's foolish youth is separated from her wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves. Is it strange, then, that the chastening influence of sorrow has transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman—a woman in whom sentiment takes the higher form of universal sympathy and tenderness? She has faithfully employed the trust confided to her. The money bequeathed to her by the ardent lover, who fancied that he had won the woman of his choice, and that his sole duty was to protect her from worldly loss or trouble,—the fortune bequeathed under such strange circumstances has become a sacred trust, to be accounted for to the dead. Only the mourner knows the exquisite happiness involved in any act performed for the sake of the lost. Our Protestant creed, which will not permit us to pray for our dead, cannot forbid the consecra-

tion of our good works to those departed and beloved creatures.

Charles Raymond transferred to Isabel something of that affection which he had felt for Roland Lansdell; and he and the orphans, grown into estimable young persons of sixteen and seventeen, spent a great deal of their time at Mordred Priory. The agricultural labourer, who had known the Doctor's Wife only as a pale-faced girlish creature, sitting under the shelter of a hedgerow, with a green parasol above her head, and a book in her lap, had good reason to bless the Doctor's Widow; for model cottages arose in many a pleasant corner of the estate that had once been Roland Lansdell's—pretty Elizabethan cottages, with peaked gables and dormer windows, and wonderful ovens, that would cook a maximum of provision by the aid of a minimum of fuel. Allotment gardens spread themselves here and there on pleasant slopes; and coming suddenly upon some woody hollow, you generally found yourself face to face with the Tudor windows of a schoolhouse, a substantial modern building, set in

an old-world garden, where there were great gnarled pear-trees, and a cluster of beehives in a bowery corner, sheltered by bushes of elder and hazel. Even the dreaded innovation of steam-ploughs and threshing-machines brought no discontent to the farmers round Mordred.

Sigismund Smith appeared sometimes at Mordred Priory, always accompanied by a bloated and dilapidated leathern writing-case, unnaturally distended by stuff which he calls "copy," and other stuff which he speaks of as "proofs."

Telegrams from infuriated proprietors of penny journals pursue him in his calm retreat, and a lively gentleman in a white hat has been known to arrive per express-train, vaguely declaring his intention of "standing over" Mr. Smith during the production of an urgently-required chapter of *The Bride of the Bosphorus; or, the Fourteen Corpses of the Caspian Sea.*

He is very happy and very inky; and the rustic wanderers who meet a pale-faced and mild-looking gentleman loitering in the green lanes about Mordred, with his hat upon the back of his

head, and his insipid blue eyes fixed on vacancy, would be slow to perceive in him the deliberate contriver of one of the most atrocious and cold-blooded schemes of vengeance that ever outraged the common dictates of human nature and adorned the richly-illustrated pages of a penny periodical. Amongst the wild-roses and new-mown hay of Midlandshire, Mr. Smith finds it sweet to lie at ease, weaving the dark webs of crime which he subsequently works out upon paper in the dingy loneliness of his Temple chambers. He is still a bachelor, and complains that he is not the kind of man to fall in love, as he is compelled to avail himself of the noses and eyes, ruby lips, and golden or raven tresses—there are no other hues in Mr. Smith's vocabulary—of every eligible young lady he meets, for the decking out of his numerous heroines. "Miss Binks?" he will perhaps remark, when a lady's name is mentioned to him; "oh, yes; *she's* Bella the Ballet-Girl (one of Bickers's touch-and-go romances; the first five numbers, and a magnificent engraving of one of Landseer's best pictures, for a penny); I finished

her off last week: she poisoned herself with insect-powder in a garret near Drury Lane, after setting fire to the house and grounds of her destroyer; she ran through a hundred and thirteen numbers, and Bickers has some idea of getting me to write a sequel. You see there *might* be an antidote to the insect-powder, or the oilman's shop-boy might have given Bella patent-mustard in mistake."

But it has been observed of late that Mr. Smith pays very special attention to the elder of the two orphans, whom he declares to be too good for penny numbers, and a charming subject for three volumes of the quiet and domestic school; and he has consulted Mr. Raymond respecting the investment of his deposit-account, which is supposed to be something considerable; for a gentleman who lives chiefly upon bread-and-marmalade and weak tea may amass a very comfortable little independence from the cultivation of sensational literature in penny numbers.

THE END.

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34